The Historical Film in the Era of New Hollywood, 1967-1980

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PhD

Abstract

This thesis is the first sustained analysis of historical films made in the New Hollywood era (1967-80). It explores the mediation of the era's social, cultural and ideological concerns in feature films that represent key periods in American history. The terms New Hollywood and the historical film are utilised with revisionist aims. As well as considering the new wave of 'auteur' cinema synonymous with the New Hollywood, the thesis demonstrates the diverse range of films produced in this era. Similarly, it rejects the boundary drawing practiced by many studies of history and film, and submits that any film set in the past can be used to explore the values, assumptions and ideological conflicts of the present. Furthermore, the thesis contends that analysis of historical films allows us to understand how audiences of a given period engage with the past in emotional, moral and aesthetic terms.

The method and approach of this research is robust and wide reaching, providing evidence based analysis of each film's production and reception, as well as close readings of individual texts. The primary sources utilised include production files, draft screenplays, film reviews, press interviews and other forms of publicity. The vast majority of new Hollywood historical films are set in the recent past, and the six case studies undertaken in this thesis include a broad section of the era's significant historical films: *The Day of the Locust* (1975), a drama centred on 1930s Hollywood; *Sounder* (1972), a story of Depression-era African American sharecroppers in the deep South; *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), a Second World War combat drama; *The Way We Were* (1973), a romantic film bridging the radical 1930s and the McCarthy 'witchhunts' of the 1950s; and *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Grease* (1978), which look back on the early rock and roll era of the late 1950s and early 1960s with nostalgia.

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The past and its representation has an ineluctable relationship with the present, of which the Hollywood historical film is perhaps its most conspicuous expression. Of course, for the American film industry, that a historical film resonates with the values, attitudes and concerns of contemporary film-goers is a commercial imperative, as relevancy underpins success. As such, the past according to Hollywood represents a rich and compelling field of enquiry for the cultural historian. Moreover, an intrinsic value of historical films is that distortion, anachronism, partisanship and oversimplification are amongst the means by which these commercial ends are achieved. Indeed, it is precisely these elements, which for many traditional historians count as some of the major offenses of the medium, that make them such informative historical documents, not about the events they represent, but about the period in which they were made. Proceeding from this premise, this thesis investigates the different ways in which American 'historical films' produced between 1967 and 1980, an era commonly referred to as the 'New Hollywood', mediated the concerns of the present. This was a period of declining and fragmenting audiences, crisis and re-adjustment within the film industry, and conflict and turbulence within wider society, all factors that gave rise to the diversity of the era's cinema, which ranged from traditional representations to stylistically bold genre revisionism, as well as movies variously configured in an effort to recapture cinema's lost mass audience. The past, as it was projected on to the nation's screens during this time, was similarly varied, and as a site of both escapist nostalgia and critical reflection, historical films expressed the cultural values, assumptions and contradictions of the period in complex and compelling ways. The meanings and pleasures of the New Hollywood historical film, and how they mediated the concerns of the present is examined across six key case studies.

Scholarly research into the filmic representation of history is wide-ranging, and includes books that focus upon the conceptual and methodological approach to historical filmmaking with reference to a varied and diverse range of historical films, as well as on specific generic 'types' (for example, the Second World War combat movie), historical periods ('the Tudors'), national cinemas (the British historical film), eras of filmmaking (the contemporary Hollywood historical film), historical themes (slavery), and individual figures (Elizabeth I). By critically surveying this discourse, this introductory chapter will set out the approach and expansive definition of the 'historical film' utilised by this study.[1] Likewise, with reference to recent scholarship on the 'New Hollywood', a broader and more inclusive definition of this term will be set out, which reflects the true range and scope of the period's filmmaking. Finally, the method of this thesis, which combines evidence-based investigation with close textual analysis, is explained in depth, followed by a description of each chapter.

The historical film: discourse and definition

Central to the development of the debate over the contribution historical films make to our historical understanding, was the creation of the academic journal *Film and History* in 1971, which advocated the use of film in historical research or as a pedagogical tool. Whilst the main focus of discussion within the 'film and history' movement was the use of actuality footage or documentary film as a primary source, the representation of history in feature films was also considered an important area of inquiry, particularly with regards to issues of accuracy and authenticity. Informing this discussion, moreover, was the recognition that film was inescapably shaped by its historical 'moment' of production, or, in other words, was understood to 'reflect' the social and political

[1] It is important to note this term is primarily a critical classification, and is not typically used in commercial, industrial or journalistic discourses on the historical film.

concerns of the period in which it is made.[2] The idea of film as a 'mirror' of society was posited in *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), Siegfried Kracauer's seminal study of 1930s German cinema. Kraucauer's analysis was subsequently criticised for its reliance upon speculative social psychology and its lack of historical rigour, but nonetheless established a key foundational concept in this field of critical inquiry. A revised version of Kracauer's reflectionist model is employed in a number of important studies from the 1970s, including Jeffrey Richards' *Visions of Yesterday* and Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America*.[3] Research into the evidential value of cinema during the 1980s, such as the influential edited anthology *American History/American Film* (1988), however, rejected the fundamental notion of film as a reflection of society. In the book's preface, the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. contends that cinema 'is a notably ambiguous, even duplicitous art', and, as such, its relationship to contemporary society is far more complex and challenging. To unlock 'the rich potential....of film as historical artifacts', he writes, requires 'analysing them in their broader cultural context, and paying close attention to historical content, production, background, and audience reception'.[4]

That the historical film is inextricably bound up with the concerns of the present is also the view advanced by Marc Ferro's *Cinéma et Histoire* (1977) and Pierre Sorlin's *The Film in History* (1980). In the latter study the author defines the historical film as 'a reconstruction of the social relationship which, using the pretext of the past, reorganises the present'.[5] However, in spite of this conceptual common ground, significant differences distinguish the approach of these studies from the 'film and history' school of thought. Taking the form of a theoretical reflection on the nature of the historical

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[2] Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 4.

[3] James Chapman, H. Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper, *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 3-4.

[4] John E. O'Connor, and Martin A. Jackson, *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*, New expanded ed. (New York: Continuum, 1988), pp. xiv and xvii.

[5] Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 80.

film, Ferro and Sorlin's analyses are less concerned with issues of accuracy or authenticity, than they are with the ideological construction of film texts. Assessing the role of ideology in shaping filmic history, Ferro, for example makes the 'distinction...between films inscribed in the flow of dominant (or oppositional) currents of thought and those that propose an independent or innovative view of societies.'As well as having 'separated themselves from ideological forces' the other criterion for inclusion in this latter grouping of 'good' historical filmmaking, which includes the work of 'auteur' directors Sembene Ousmane, Jean Renoir and Luchino Visconti, is that 'the writing be cinematic'.[6]

The theoretical orientation of these studies, and the underlying belief that a clear distinction should be drawn between cinematic history and history in written form, laid the foundations for the second major paradigm of historical film analysis which burgeoned in the last two decades. Robert Brent Toplin and Robert Rosenstone, two leading proponents of this conceptual approach, strongly assert that historical filmmaking must be judged according to its own conventions and characteristics, and that it has the potential to be more than simply a primary source document. Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge that compared to written history, argues Toplin, history on film, owing to the constraints of time or the commercial priorities of movie drama, is variously individualised, emotionalised, morally uplifting, simplified, compressed, 'partisan', 'closed', and a blend of factual truth and fictional invention.[7] Yet, contrary to the view of many traditional historians, these qualities are not necessarily grounds for disparaging film as a medium of history, not least because they make the past compelling to a broad and diverse audience. Neither do they preclude a film from achieving a reasonable fidelity to the documentable 'truth', and conveying 'thoughtful,

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[6] Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 161-2.

[7] See chapter 1 of Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press Of Kansas, 2002).

even insightful perspectives of history.'[8] In fact, written history, as Rosenstone points out, in a number of key respects is not dissimilar to film. It is an interpretative narrative or 'story' that lends emphasis or gives meaning to a selection of raw data, or, in other words, at its basis is an ideological construct that is part objective science and part creative invention.[9] Any judgement over the historical value of film, he notes, should consider its distinctive strengths: its 'factuality and texture' or 'objects' of history', and its representation of metaphorical or symbolic 'truth'.[10]

However, for these two scholars only a small minority of films with past settings exhibit the requisite qualities and characteristics to qualify as 'historical'. First and foremost a film must be based on actual events and real personages. Thus costume dramas are excluded, such as *Gone With the Wind* (1939), for example, because, writes Rosenstone, it 'ignores' the 'ongoing discourse about both the Civil War and race relations in America', and 'uses the exotic locale of the past as no more than a setting for romance and adventure.'[11] Similarly, for Toplin 'Faction', a category that includes *Gladiator, U-571* and *The Patriot* (all 2000), for example, falls outside the bounds of serious and insightful historical filmmaking, because they '[D]o not place real events or people at core of narrative.'[12] Moreover, he argues, films may focus on the documentable past, but fail to make the grade for a number of other reasons; for example, for taking too many liberties with the historical record (*Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *Amistad* (1997)), or for the 'failure to deliver exciting drama' (*Heaven's Gate* (1980)).[13] Historical films that are models of success are the recipients of Toplin's awards for

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[8] Ibid. p. 4.

[9] Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film, Film on History: Concepts, Theories and Practice* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson, 2006), pp. 161-2.

[10] Ibid., pp. 8, 16 and 48.

[11] Ibid., p. 45.

[12] Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 97.

[13] Ibid., pp. 89 and 108.

special achievement, and include: *Das Boot* (1981) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) for 'communicating a feeling for a different time and place'[14], *The Longest Day* (1962) *Schindler's List* (1993) for 'interpreting major historical developments'[15], and *Patton* (1970) for 'examining controversy through conflicting perspectives'.[16]

Rosenstone's attitude towards mainstream drama is similarly selective, and like Toplin he holds up *Glory* (1989) as an exemplary historical production from this classification. He argues that the film, which tells the story of an African American army unit during the American Civil War, masterfully blends fictional invention with factual accuracy, and, crucially, engages with the 'larger *discourse of history*'.[17] But for Rosenstone there is a category that is worthier still: innovative, experimental or postmodern historical films. 'Made in conscious opposition to Hollywood codes, conventions and practices', he writes, 'such works are created to contest the seamless stories of heroes and victims that make up the mainstream feature.' Again, small in number and, on the whole, not very well known, this category includes *Walker* (1987) and *JFK* (1991), films which deploy strategies of ironic subversion or formal disparity, for instance, 'to make history more complex, interrogative and self-conscious'.[18]

As has been stated, this thesis examines how the past in Hollywood film was formulated for consumption in the late 1960s and 1970s. Its approach adheres to the 'new film history', the third paradigm advanced by James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper, which combines aspects of the 'film and history' school and the 'history as vision' approach of Rosenstone and Toplin.[19] The definition of the historical film it

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[14] Ibid., 114-118.

[15] Ibid., pp. 118-123.

[16] Ibid., pp. 131-135

[17] Rosenstone, *History on Film*, pp. 39-49.

[18] Ibid., p. 50.

[19] Chapman, Glancy, and Harper (eds.), *The New Film History*, p. 12.

employs, moreover, is expansive and includes films that are not based on historical personages or documented facts, and, as Sue Harper writes, 'that use the mythical and symbolic aspects of the past as a means of providing pleasure, rather than instruction'.[20] Thus, while this analysis is informed by the valuable contributions Rosenstone and Toplin have made to our understanding of how film form is used to 'write' history, it contests the exclusive and somewhat elitist classifications of the historical film these scholars assert. Likewise, whereas the 'film and history' school's concern with issues of authenticity and accuracy are not shared by this study, its evidence based approach to the analysis of the historical film's contexts of production and reception is, and represents an important part of its method. Indeed, the examination of the contextual factors shaping New Hollywood filmic history is supported by archival research, and draws upon a range of primary source materials, ranging from fan letters, through advertising to production memos.

Marnie Hughes-Warrington advances a similar methodology, and presents a cogent argument for a less circumscribed view of the historical film. Hughes-Warrington takes issue with Rosenstone, for example, for elevating a minority of of 'worthy' films as proof that historical filmmaking 'stands adjacent' and is not subordinate to written history, contending that this type of scholarly practice stems from the historical film's 'inferiority complex' and the traditional hierarchal arrangement that accords superior status to history in written form.[21] Invoking the post-structuralist philosophy of Jacques Derrida, she argues '[N]either are *forms* or *guises* of truth telling but merely language games' and cannot 'be traced back to something called 'history''.[22] There is, therefore, no 'history apart from historical practices', or, put in a different way, 'historical films

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[20] Sue Harper, 'Bonnie Prince Charlie Revisited: British Costume Film in the 1950s, in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: BFI publishing, 1997), p. 133.

[21] Robert A. Rosenstone, 'The Historical Film as Real History', *Film-Historia*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1995), pp. 21-22.

[22] Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to*, pp. 25 and 32.

and written histories are not forms of history; they are history'.[23] It thus follows that the comparable practice of 'defensive boundary drawing' employed to establish the pedagogical or scholarly value of a limited number of historical films and distinguish them from other filmic representations of the past, is also contested. '[T]o begin to understand historical films', Hughes-Warrington argues, 'we must see them rather as sites of relation, agreement and even contestation among film producers, critics and scholars, promoters and viewers.'[24] Indeed, given cinema is first and foremost a commercially driven enterprise that aims to capture a diverse audience, the extent to which the various desires, demands and priorities critics and viewers place on the re-presentation of the past correspond to the demarcations of history and film scholars, remains relatively under-explored. Hughes-Warrington writes:

> What makes a film historical... is its location in a time-bound network of discussions – more or less explicit – on what history is and what it is used for. On this definition, any film may be historical because it is viewed as offering indexical markers – on screen phenomena seen as capturing or connected with past phenomena – or because it suggests something about how and why histories are made.[25]

David Eldridge and Jennifer Smyth are two other scholars who contest the ascription of 'seriousness' to the historical film. '[T]he simple fact that the majority of films set in the past *do not* take history seriously', as Eldridge points out, 'has apparently struck few academics of actually being of significance itself.'[26] Typically, costume dramas, westerns, and musicals are amongst the genres devalued by academics, based on the

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[23] Ibid., pp. 9 and 32.

[24] Ibid., p. 6.

[25] Ibid., p. 191.

[26] David Eldridge, *Hollywood's History Films* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), p. 4.

contention that the past is employed principally as a production value or exotic backdrop. Such an exclusive focus, argues Eldridge, 'ignores a vast amount of material which is shot through with ideas of history and which tells us a great deal about the historical consciousness of the people who made them.'[27] A more inclusive approach, on the other hand, considers 'fictional' historical films as worthy of critical attention as those based on real events, because, in contradistinction to the narrow definitions adopted by many scholars, it recognises the heterogenous audience pleasures of the filmic past, and the American film industry's 'flexible appreciation of its cultural impact', as Jennifer Smyth puts it.[28] For example, productions that fall outside the bounds of a more exclusive definition of the historical film owing to their mythical tendencies, are instead understood to be intrinsic to the diverse character of the public's historical consciousness and understanding. The merging of history and myth in the western, as Eldridge notes, serves to illustrate this point; without the transformative power of myth, the 'prosaic' events of America's westward expansion would have lacked cultural meaning or pleasurable value for the wider public and would have been 'lost' to history.[29]

Other common characteristics enhancing the pleasures or adding pertinence for audiences of the filmic past include intertextuality, irony and stylisation, which have become synonymous with the 'postmodern turn' in popular culture. For the vast majority of historians these practices are either incompatible or at odds with the epistemological aims of written history, but for Rosenstone, as has been noted, when put to constructive use are amongst cinema's key strengths and set it apart as an distinctive and important medium of historical understanding. Again, however, this particular act of boundary drawing is open to question. On the one hand, it is arguable the small canon

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[27] Ibid.

[28] J. E. Smyth (ed.), *Hollywood and the American Historical Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. xix.

[29] Eldridge, *Hollywood's History*, p. 5.

of ‘experimental’ films Rosenstone champions forms a distinct grouping owing to their deployment of self-reflexive strategies for explicit and intentional meta-critical ends. On the other hand, this classification is problematised by the view of a number of critics who maintain that the past according to Hollywood is almost by definition ‘playful and opportunistic’. As Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter note: ‘Films, to the despair of historians, have always taken a ‘postmodern’ approach to the past, viewing it not as a dull chronicle but as a dynamic resource for exciting stories and poetic and morally uplifting untruths.’[30] By this characterisation the ‘postmodern historical film’ becomes a devalued category. Indeed, whilst the vast majority all films that are set in the past strive for naturalism, at the same time they are also inherently self-reflexive, a quality that has the potential to undermine the notion of a film providing a transparent window on the past, or the possibility of the audience accepting it as such. Consider film stars, for example; an actor’s star image, as Vivian Sobchak argues, is ‘overdetermined’ and ‘intertextual’, and not only ‘transcends’ or ‘outlives’ the historical characters he or she has played by virtue of their other roles and extra-textual persona, but also exceed the particularity of the past with the universal values and meaning their image personifies. Similar to the process of mythification in the western, furthermore, the star text as ‘agent of history’ lends significance or even ‘magnitude’ to the representations of the past in film.[31]

The New Hollywood and the historical film

The other key term of this study similarly requires explanation. The ‘New Hollywood’ has been the subject of a considerable amount of scholarly attention, particularly in the last decade and half, yet in contrast to the historical film, is a term of reference

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[30] Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter, and Imelda Whelehan (eds.), *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 2.

[31] Vivian Sobchak, ‘“Surge and Splendor": A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic’, in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), p. 310.

commonly used by film academics, critics, professionals and fans alike. Critical disagreements concerning how 'new', original or radical, the New Hollywood actually was, moreover, mean scholarly definitions of the term vary.[32] There are, however, a number of key points of critical agreement. Firstly, Hollywood underwent something of an artistic 'renaissance' between 1967 and 1976, owing to the production of an unprecedented number of stylistically bold and thematically challenging mainstream films, such as *The Graduate* (1967) *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Easy Rider* (1969) *Little Big Man* (1970), *Cabaret* (1972), *The Conversation* (1974) and *Taxi Driver* (1976). Secondly, the majority of these movies were the work of a group of young and relatively inexperienced filmmakers, many of whom either started out working in television or were graduates of film school, such as Arthur Penn and Francis Ford Coppola respectively, and exhibited a number of key creative influences, pre-eminently the formal experimentation of post-war European new wave cinema. Thirdly, the epochal success of *Jaws* (1975) heralded the new industry paradigm of big-budget, cross-marketed, heavily advertised, and highly profitable 'event' movies, and the type of challenging films that had been released in the preceding period had all but disappeared by the beginning of the next decade. As this overview indicates, the New Hollywood, somewhat confusingly, is a term often used with reference to American cinema between 1967 and 1975/76, and also the post *Jaws* event movies or blockbusters that dominated production thereafter. This thesis, by contrast, employs a broad definition of the New Hollywood, noting that the late 1970s was a period of gradual transition between the two paradigms.[33]

The academic literature on the New Hollywood is extensive. The first significant wave of research emerged during the 1980s, and, reflecting the dominant intellectual concerns

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[32] For an incisive critical overview of this debate see Noel King, 'The New Hollywood', in Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink (eds), *The Cinema Book*, 2nd ed. (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), pp. 98-105.

[33] Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower, 2005), p. 3. See also; Cook and Bernink, *The Cinema*, p. 98.

in film studies at the time, was predominantly text-focussed, theory-based ideological criticism. Amongst the most influential are *A Cinema of Loneliness* (first published in 1980), Robert Kolker's auteur-structuralist study of 'the brief modernist movement in commercial American cinema' that occurred between the late 1960s and mid-1970s, in the form of an in-depth discussion of a number key directors, including Arthur Penn, Stanley Kubrick and Martin Scorcese.[34] Robert Ray's *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema 1930-1980* (1985), is another important work. Highlighting the influence of post-War European New Wave filmmaking, Ray focuses on the ideological polarisation and contradictions of the 'New American Cinema', and, with reference to French critical theory (Althusser and Lacan), asserts the durability of Hollywood's traditional mythology.[35] Robin Wood's seminal essay 'The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the 70s' (1980), which draws on Freudian and Marcusian theoretical concepts, similarly observes the 'crisis in ideological confidence' that 'can be felt to underlie most of the important films of the late 60s and 70s.'[36] Many of the key ideas and arguments in these studies remain central to the analysis the New Hollywood, particularly with regards to the complex and contradictory ideological currents shaping American film at the time. Yet, the above approaches, owing to their critical focus, methodological approach and theoretical orientation, display a number of major shortcomings. First, the emphasis upon 'important' films, disregards a sizable and significant proportion of the period's cinema. Second, focussing on individual directors and a canon of auteur productions, ignores the collaborative nature of the filmmaking process. Third, the extent to which contextual factors - social, cultural, economic and industrial - determine the style and content of individual films are not sufficiently accounted for. Fourth, owing to the

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[34] Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. xii. The film-makers: 1st edition - Arthur Penn, Stanley Kubrick, Martin Scorcese, Francis Ford Coppola and Robert Altman; 2nd edition - Coppola replaced by Steven Spielberg; 3rd edition - Oliver Stone added.

[35] Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[36] Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 50. Wood's essay was first published in *Movie*, no. 27 - 28, (Winter/Spring; 1980/81), pp. 24-42.

theoretical concepts that inform these readings, there is a tendency to construct a totalised account of the New Hollywood and drastically downplay human agency.

The second and more significant wave of interest in the New Hollywood has occurred in the last fifteen years. Pre-eminent amongst this discourse are volumes 8 and 9 in the University of California Press' indispensable 'History of the American Cinema' series: *The Sixties: 1960-1969* by Paul Monaco (2001) and David A. Cook's *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (2002).[37] The scholarly aims of these two books reflect the historical 'turn' away from the text based, theory-led research since the 1980s, towards more comprehensive and diverse methodologies that place a strong emphasis on evidence-based research and the critical analysis of social, cultural and industrial contexts. In one of the most recent studies, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (2005), Peter Krämer focusses on box office hits, combining integrated analysis (hit patterns, industrial development, shifts in public opinion and generational change) with the discussion of thematic content, and situates the New Hollywood in relation to the shifting contours of commercial filmmaking from the late 1940s to the mid-1980s.[38] Paralleling this upsurge in academic research has been a greater awareness amongst the wider public, which, more than any other publication or commentary, can be attributed to Peter Biskind's popular (and sensational) account of the key figures and films of the New Hollywood: *Easy Riders and Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (1999), as well as the 2003 documentary based on the book.[39]

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[37] Paul Monaco, *The Sixties: 1960-1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[38] Krämer, *The New Hollywood*, p. 10.

[39] Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock-'N'-Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

This thesis is the first sustained analysis of the New Hollywood historical film. In other studies of the New Hollywood, films that are set in the past, a popular staple of any era, have necessarily been a feature of the analysis but not its central focus, and have typically been investigated in accordance with other generic categories; the western, war film, gangster film and so on. As films are inherently 'generic', any discussion must be informed by the questions of genre, both as commercial and critical classifications, but this research aims to incorporate this discussion into a wider analysis of the past as a site of pleasure, conflict and understanding that is inextricably bound up with the present.

Another key aim is to reflect the diversity and complexity of late 1960s and 1970s filmmaking, two defining features that across the wider discourse remain under-explored, primarily owing to the remarkable impact the new Hollywood 'auteurs' had on American filmmaking during this time. These individuals, the high number of original and compelling films they produced, and the circumstances surrounding their production have since become synonymous with this period in American film history and entered into Hollywood folklore. Popular contemporary accounts, such as Biskind's book, have drawn upon and reinforced this mythology. In similar fashion, while scholarly discourse on the New Hollywood presents a broader and more balanced picture of the period's filmmaking, much of it nonetheless shares a similar focus. In short, the great many films produced during this time that are marginal to or outside the bounds of the 'modernist' filmmaking typically associated with the New Hollywood, are not given due emphasis.

Recent scholarship has invited us to reconsider this view of the New Hollywood. Krämer, for example, proposes box office success as a marker of a film's cultural significance or its potential to influence future production trends, and notes that between 1967 and 1976 '[S]ome of these hits were made by the great directors usually associated

with the New Hollywood, while the majority were not.'[40] That this fundamental observation does not accord with the received view of the period's filmmaking is asserted more forthrightly by Drew Casper. Describing the existing literature on the New Hollywood as 'invariably myopic', Casper questions the common tendency to emphasise and extol the iconoclastic irreverence and ostensible ideological liberalism of a narrow canon of films 'including *The Graduate* (1967), *Alice's Restaurant* (1969), *M*A*S*H* (1970), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) and *The Godfather I* and *II* (1972 and 1974) as proof of this Hollywood Renaissance.' Casper adds:

> These reckonings, to my mind, reconstruct a sizable hunk of the Hollywood scene but, alas, not its entirety. For this time of picture-making, unlike the fairly consistent Classic Hollywood period of 1929-45 and the transitional status of the relatively consistent Postwar Hollywood period of 1946-62, is quite complex and richer than noted, marked not by any continuous trajectory but rather contrasting and intersecting ideological, thematic and formal lines as well as their equally diverse cultural, industrial, technological and censorial underpinnings.[41]

The approach to the New Hollywood historical film in this thesis is similarly broad, taking in, for example, the 'forgotten' (*Sounder*, 1972), the slickly nostalgic (*The Way We Were*, 1973), and the canonical (*American Graffiti*, 1973).

Coupled with this examination of the New Hollywood historical film's heterogeneity, a further aim of this thesis is to demonstrate its significance. To date, the New Hollywood historical film has not received the kind of sustained critical attention it merits, and there are a number of possible reasons for this comparative neglect. Key is the

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[40] Krämer, *The New Hollywood*, p. 4.

[41] Drew Casper, *Hollywood Film 1963-1976: Years of Revolution and Reaction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) p. xvi.

perception that the past or 'history' was not a prominent feature of the New Hollywood era, at least not in comparison to the the period that preceded it - the 'Roadshow Era' (1949-66) - or the two or three decades since - the 'contemporary' era. The former periodisation refers to the dominant industry practice of exhibiting big-budget movies in prestigious theatres on extended runs prior to general release. A high proportion of these releases, moreover, were set in the past, with epics ranging from the Biblical, ancient and medieval periods, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as Second World War films, historical dramas, spectacular historical adventures and musicals, accounting for the majority of box office hits. For Roadshow Era audiences, a chief attraction of historical 'blockbusters', such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *Cleopatra* (1963), was their proclamations of 'seriousness' or cultural importance, which were a feature both of the extra-textual discourse surrounding the promotion of these films, and underscored textually through such devices as 'voice of God' narration and widescreen processes.[42] Similarly, since the beginning of the 1990s there has been a resurgence of big budget historical filmmaking, perhaps most closely associated with director Steven Spielberg and hit films such as *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and Oliver Stone's often controversial representations of historical events, preeminently *JFK* (1991). Widely endorsed by scholars for their authenticity, accuracy and innovative approach to the re-presentation of the past, these films were the catalyst for and focal point for much of the discourse on the historical that has emerged in recent years.[43]

There are three further factors informing the view that the past was not a noteworthy feature of the New Hollywood, particularly in comparison to the Roadshow Era. First, the New Hollywood witnessed a proportional increase in the number of films set in the

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[42] See Sobchak, '"Surge and Splendor"'.

[43] 'Seriousness', therefore, is an accolade conferred by scholars and cultural commentators, and not simply a textual effect or part of a film's marketing strategy, though of course as part of the wider discourse it authenticates and thus enhances these features.

contemporary period. Second, the vast majority of historical films produced during this time were set during the twentieth century. Third, in contrast to the period before and since, intimations of 'seriousness' or cultural importance were not common characteristics of New Hollywood historical film. Yet, in spite of these distinguishing characteristics, cinematic representations of the past achieved regular and consistent success at the box office. Between 1967 and 1974, for example, the historical film accounted for at least four out of each year's top ten highest grossing releases, peaking at six in 1970, and four out of five of the number one hit movies between 1968 and 1972: *Funny Girl* (1968), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) and *The Godfather* (1972).[44]

These box office hits, furthermore, indicate another defining feature of the period's historical filmmaking. All centre on the experiences of social 'outsiders' and thus narrate 'history' from the bottom-up, reflecting the steady process of democratisation of the cinematic past in the post-Second World War period. With this shift away from the 'celebratory or didactic' top-down histories, writes Kenneth Cameron, there was an increasing emphasis on the 'recent past'.[45] These correlative changes, he adds, 'suggests that earlier national experience was no longer a source of example and strength; it also implies that the traditionally empowered were being forced to share power, at least the power of popular attention.'[46] In the 1970s, only a very small proportion of films set in the past dealt with events before 1900, and traditional historical productions concerned with with war, politics and great men, had dwindled to just eight.[47] Correspondingly, three popular historical genres - the epic, the biographical picture and the adventure movie - which were frequently set in the pre-1900 period, and were favoured formats

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[44] Krämer, *The New Hollywood*, pp. 107-9.

[45] Kenneth M. Cameron, *America on Film: Hollywood and American History* (New York: Continuum, 1997), p. 224.

[46] Ibid., p. 225

[47] Ibid., p. 164 + 225.

for narratives based on significant personages and events from the past, dropped off markedly in the 1960s, too.

However, the decline of these generic types proved to be the exception, as the 1970s, writes Cook, 'witnessed the regular return of genre films for the first time since the classical studio era (excepting the musicals and Westerns made during the 1950s).' Driving this trend was 'the preoccupation of the New Hollywood auteurs with film history and film form', he writes, but it was also a 'form of risk reduction' on the part of the studios, as 'genre films, like stars, were inherently 'pre-sold' and easy to package'.[48] Established genres (the Western, the War film, the gangster film, detective film, film noir, the musical, and 'melodrama'), newer categories (the rock musical), or exploitation or 'b movie' genres (the teen movie and the horror film), as well as various hybrids (the 'blaxploitation' western or 'slavesploitation', for example)[49] accounted for many of the historical films of the period. To the New Hollywood 'auteurs', many of these classifications were the basis for stylistic experimentation and the exploration of challenging themes. Self-reflexive and socially critical, the resulting revised, 'corrected', and parodic genre films, articulated the generational discontent of their core under-25 year old audience. But to generalise these pictures as part of a left-liberal cycle would be to downplay key contradictions and ambiguities that problematise such a straightforward classification. Moreover, as Casper and a number of other critics have argued, it is important to emphasise the heterogeneity and complexity, not only of these individual films, but of period's other releases.[50] To be sure, the auteur cinema of the late 1960s and 1970s was a major feature of the era, but it coexisted and overlapped with a diversity of ideological and aesthetic currents, including stylistically orthodox

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[48] David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 159.

[49] See Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).

[50] See also; Peter Lev, *American Films of the '70s: Conflicting Visions*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

and conservative movies, classically mounted accommodationist pictures aimed at satisfying the centrists, as well as movies that played to both the 'left' and the 'right'.

Another distinguishing feature of the New Hollywood era, particularly its historical filmmaking, was the prevalence of nostalgia. This was implicit in the auteur cinema of the period, because while it attacked 'secondary forms', principally individual genres, it did not violate 'primary forms' like narrative and representation, owing to the superficiality of the films' formal and stylistic experimentation.[51] It thus adopted the same myths and reconciliatory patterns of Hollywood's classical period output. The outlaw heroes or 'drop-outs' in 'left cycle films', such as *Easy Rider* (1969) or *The Wild Bunch* (1969) for example, as Ray observes, contradictorily articulated the 'reactionary nostalgia' of the 1960s counter culture and embodied a revised form of heroic individualism.[52] Nostalgia emerged in a more explicit form in the early 1970s as a major aesthetic tendency, and like the resurgence in genre filmmaking, it developed into a dominant commercial tactic aimed at attracting cinema's general audience. Part of a wider cultural phenomenon, this popular wave of nostalgia movies tended to be set either in 1920s, 1930s, 1940s or 1950s and is typically viewed as a symptomatic response to contemporary issues and events; namely the socio-political turbulence of the 1960s, the economic downturn, and widespread disillusionment with the country's institutions arising from events such as the Watergate scandal. A major attraction of this filmic type is its re-presentation of an era's style and culture, which often refers to, or is 'borrowed' from other representations, such as old Hollywood films, a major repository of popular cultural memory.[53] The aestheticising of the past in the 1970s nostalgia film was widely interpreted by contemporary commentators as a conservative ideological impulse, that functions to reassure audiences by providing a simplified and idealised

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[51] Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 161.

[52] Ray, *A Certain Tendency*, pp. 297-325.

[53] M. Keith Booker, *Postmodern Hollywood: What's New in Film and Why It Makes Us Feel So Strange* (London: Praeger, 2007), p. 51.

historical context within which contemporary concerns lost much of their attendant complexity. ‘Our thirst for nostalgia’, wrote James Paris in a article on the phenomenon, ‘is not so much for mindless escapist fare as for films which allude briefly to our anxieties and then magically, sympathetically dispel them.’[54] Some films were more sympathetic than others, however, and on closer inspection the nostalgia wave reveals a variety of configurations, ranging from the ambivalent nostalgia of the Fifties ‘teen movie’ *American Graffiti* (1973) or the neo-noir *Chinatown* (1975), which both simultaneously de-mythologise and seductively evoke their genre histories, to *That’s Entertainment* (1974), a celebratory compilation of classic MGM musicals, or the gauzily nostalgic coming of age movie, *The Summer of ’42* (1971).

My research is informed by the methodology articulated by Chapman, Glancy and Harper in *The New Film History* and by Marnie Hughes-Warrington in *History Goes to the Movies*, and their dual emphasis on textual and contextual analysis. The examination of the latter encompasses the impact of historical processes, such as the relaxation of censorship regulations at the end of the 1960s; the creative input of production personnel, many of whom enjoyed a greater level of autonomy and influence than they had done in the preceding period; and audience reception, which illustrates the range of different responses a film generates and how these responses pertain to the tastes and concerns of key viewer constituencies of the New Hollywood era, such as the ‘youth’ segment or ‘new audience’. The analysis of these contexts of production and reception is based on empirical evidence, much of which was obtained from relevant archival collections in Los Angeles and London; the wide range of primary source materials utilised include reviews, publicity materials, fan letters, personal papers, productions files and scripts. The textual component of my method is likewise concerned with film as an object of historical inquiry, and employs an approach that examines their

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[54] James Paris, ‘How Hollywood's Memory's Plays Tricks on Us’, *The New York Times*, 23 November 1975, p. 15.

narrative, thematic, formal and aural content, and decodes the meanings and pleasures derived from each film's operative and interrelated elements (camerawork, costume, editing and so on). Furthermore, the awareness and understanding of contemporary stylistic trends and tendencies, such as aesthetic nostalgia or the 'modernist' strategies of the New Hollywood 'auteurs', will inform this discussion. Such an analytical competence enables the identification of consonance or tension between these textual elements, which in turn can be interpreted with reference to the agency of its performers or producers, and the shaping influence of historical processes.

Five out of the six case studies that make up this thesis were selected on the basis of both their popular appeal and cultural significance. The other case study, *The Day of the Locust* (1975), is an ambitious failure that nonetheless reveals a great deal about the unprecedented creative freedom afforded filmmakers in the 1970s, and also its commercial limits. The other key considerations for inclusion in this study were that the films selected for analysis represent a range of different generic 'sub-types' and historical settings, exemplify the key stylistic tendencies, and mediate the dominant social and cultural concerns of the period. Each examines the production, textual construction and reception of an individual film (excepting the 'Fifties' chapter, which analyses two), situating it within the wider historical developments of the period, as well as in relation to their generic type, historically and with reference to specific films released contemporaneously.

A major trend in historical filmmaking in the mid- to late 1970s were 'movies about the movies', which ranged from the celebratory, such as *That's Entertainment* (1974), to the case study discussed in chapter 1 and the most cynical film about Hollywood produced at the time, *The Day of the Locust* (1975). Adapted from Nathanael West's 1939 novel and directed by John Schlesinger, this auteurist historical production is about the Hollywood film industry from the perspective of its struggling fringe players. Its

overarching theme is the violence and resentment arising from unattainable (movie-made) fantasies, which is thematically enhanced and enlarged by the historical backdrop of the Great Depression and the rise of Nazism in Europe. This chapter also provides an in-depth examination of the contextual factors that gave rise to the 'movie movie' wave and the New Hollywood in general, with reference to the changes in the film industry, audience taste patterns and within society at large in the post-Second World War period.

Chapter 2 examines Martin Ritt's Depression era paean to the deep bonds and resilience of the black family: *Sounder* (1972). Discussed in relation to past representations of African Americans in Hollywood film, the film is also analysed in the context of the popular and controversial wave of black action films released in the early 1970s, which tapped into the defiant mood and militant separatism of Black Power. *Sounder*, by contrast was visually redolent of the images of dignified suffering captured by photographers such as Walker Evans during the Depression-era photography, and in spirit and sentiment chimed in with the non-violent integrationist ethos of Civil Rights, a fact enhanced and exploited by the lively and heated discourse that developed around the film.

In the shadow of Vietnam, Hollywood channelled the conflicting sentiments over America's controversial war in South-east Asia into a number of Second World War combat movies. Chapter 3 focuses on perhaps the most famous and influential of the period's war movies, *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), directed by Robert Aldrich. Aldrich's cynical combat thriller is significant for its graphic depictions of brutality and violence, and for the way it covertly addresses contemporary concerns. Released during the escalation of the Vietnam war, it will be demonstrated how Aldrich re-worked the original screenplay to reflect this development and the anti-authoritarian sentiment it provoked amongst many young Americans.

Chapter 4 examines the first mainstream American film about the Hollywood Red Scare, the ambitious, uneven yet commercially successful political melodrama, or 'nostalgia movie', *The Way We Were* (1973). Moving from the innocence and optimism of the late 1930s to the paranoia of the post-war anti-communist witch-hunts, the story charts the unlikely romantic relationship between a self-assured, career-minded WASP writer (Redford), and a principled left-wing Jewish activist (Streisand). Star meaning is of intrinsic importance here, and in the way it contests the cynical pragmatism of the former (lead/star) with the naive idealism of the latter, it channels 1970s social conflict and ethnic identity politics. Competing with these thematic currents and an important pleasure for mainstream audiences, was the film's overlay of nostalgic imagery, which acted to simplify and distance contemporary concerns.

The 'Fifties' was the most culturally resonant form of nostalgia during the 1970s, and chapter 5 discusses the two most popular films set in the earlier era, and in doing so highlights the contrasting style and tone of these representations, and the different meanings they held for contemporary audiences. The generational appeal of *American Graffiti* (1973) directed by the young 'movie brat', George Lucas, was broad, but this coming-of-age movie set in small town Modesto, California, was especially poignant for the baby-boomer demographic who reached adulthood in the 1960s and 1970s. The film's overarching theme is 'change'[55], and by virtue of its 1962 setting, narrative themes and stylistic strategies, it heralds a key historical and cultural turning point, and anticipates the transition from the 'innocence' of the '1950s' and its teen subculture of rock 'n' roll, custom cars and sock hops, to the 'experience' of the '1960s', and the generational discord and public traumas that marked the decade. While more self-conscious than *American Graffiti*, the parodic teen musical *Grease* (1978) is nonetheless a more conservative representation of the Fifties, reflecting the broad rightward political

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[55] Larry Sturhan, 'The Filming of 'American Graffiti': An Interview with Director George Lucas', *Filmmakers Newsletter*, 7 (1974), p. 24.

shift concomitant with American cinema's commercial re-adjustment in the late 1970s. The film's chief ideological operation is its celebration of middle class values that is advanced by its musical set-pieces, central love story, and assimilating the subversive, working class 'greaser' subculture into suburbia and the cultural mainstream. That this was the cultural mainstream of the present was signalled, amongst other features, by the soundtrack's blend of 1970s disco and 1950s rock 'n' roll.

Chapter 1: The 'New Wave' and 'Old Hollywood': *The Day of the Locust* (1975), 'Movies about the Movies' and the Generational Divide

The late 1960s and 1970s was a period of crisis and re-adjustment in Hollywood. With its financial problems deepening at the end of the 1960s the film industry responded by producing an increasing number of releases aimed at the 'youth' or under-25 year old audience, the biggest segment of a fragmented and contracting market. Adult themes, graphic imagery, formal experimentation and the questioning of American society, its values, and the nation's foundational myths, were the qualities that proved popular with this niche, particularly with its preponderance of male cinema-goers, a market variously supplied by foreign imports, b-movie exploitation pictures and Hollywood new wave genre revisionism and parody. The burgeoning of this audience segment was the chief reason for the period's unprecedented stylistic and ideological diversity, but it was also a development that keyed into the contemporary generation gap. Ranging across a much disputed boundary between obscenity and 'art' and taking advantage of the relaxation of censorship laws at the end of the 1960s, these films expressed cultural attitudes and a 'new morality' at odds with those of their parent's generation. The type of films that affirmed the values and reflected the world view of the over 30 year old demographic were more readily supplied by television, with the constant re-runs of old movies. For many young Americans, on the other hand, this movie back catalogue fostered both historical knowledge of, and an ambivalent or ironic attitude towards studio era Hollywood, which, along with the 'new criticism' and a proliferation of college courses, formed an integral part of a vibrant critical film culture.

In the first half of the 1970s, this polarising turn in the production strategies of the American film industry was ameliorated by a wave of popular nostalgia films that looked back fondly at the country's recent past and recalled Hollywood's older forms. Widespread feelings of disillusionment and uncertainty arising from the country's protracted conflict in Vietnam, the Watergate Scandal and the economic downturn intensified the escapist impulse. A shared appreciation of America's cinematic past, albeit from different perspectives, helped bridge generational differences. The emergence of nostalgic imagery across a range of different films, furthermore, was also indicative of the durability of Hollywood's classical narrative and representational modes, and thus the culture's traditional myths, which, although questioned during the period, ultimately returned in renewed form. Overlapping with this wave of nostalgia and dovetailing with the tendency towards artistic self-examination and self-consciousness in contemporary film, were studio and silent era set 'movies about the movies', a key trend in the mid- to late 1970s, and a paradoxical generic type, writes Christopher Ames, that 'simultaneously demystify and mystify their subject.'[1] In other words, the stories about individuals seeking fame and fortune in Hollywood that typify this self-referential classification, purport to reveal what goes on behind the scenes and away from the camera. Yet, owing to the fact that this generic type are still, by definition, movies, they are constructs formed of the same production processes and intertextual discourses as any other film. Movies about the movies therefore sustain the very metaphors and myths underlying the 'meaning' of 'Hollywood', such as glamour, celebrity and success, that they apparently lay bare.[2]

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[1] Christopher Ames, *Movies About the Movies: Hollywood Reflected* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), p. 4.

[2] A shift occurred in the 1950s, the last period prior to the 1970s during which 'movie movies' were produced in any significant quantity. Before this shift, movies about the movies functioned to affirm the 'American Dream', an ideological structure common to the vast majority of film genres in the first three decades or so of Hollywood filmmaking. Andersen cites *Merton of the movies* (1947) as a key example from this period, a comedy romance about a naive, aspiring actor from Kansas who travels to Hollywood and, against the odds, manages to make it in the movies. From around the 1950s the movies about the movies classification moved away from celebrations of America's myth of success, towards more critical and tragic exposés of the industry. Key examples of 'anti-Merton' films from the decade include *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). See Patrick D. Andersen, 'In Its Own Image: The Cinematic Vision of Hollywood', unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Michigan (1976), p. 2.

Focussing on key contemporary developments but also the broader context of Hollywood's post-war transformation, this chapter situates this trend in relation to the decline of the family audience, the emergence of the 'new audience', and the rise of the 'youth' film. Following this analysis is a case study of the production, textual construction and reception of *The Day of the Locust* (1975), which was directed by John Schlesinger and one of Paramount's prestige historical releases in the mid-1970s. Adapted from Nathanael West's sardonic 1939 novel, Schlesinger's film is significant for its uncompromising view of Hollywood from those in thrall to its illusory world. It is noteworthy, furthermore, for how it self-consciously intersects with key contemporary stylistic tendencies, and 'tests' or disrupts the 'built-in' contradiction of movies about the movies, an approach that problematised its mainstream appeal.

Hollywood's post-war transformation, the rise of the 'youth' film and the 'movie movie' wave

Cinema-going reached record levels during the 1940s, only to go into steep decline at the end of the decade. During the Second World War weekly attendances averaged 85 million, and between 1946-48 rose to 90 million. But by 1953 this number had fallen by approximately half to 46 million. Following a short period of recovery mid-decade the overall downward trend continued, with a precipitous drop-off in audience numbers between 1965-67, from 44 to 17.8 million.[3] Four years later movie-going fell to an all-time low of 15.8 million, before climbing back up 20 million by the end of the 1970s.

The reasons for the dramatic decline in movie-going are complex, but at its basis it is linked to the greater affluence of Americans in the post-war period and the radical life-style changes this engendered, and the increasing affordability of television. The

[3] John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1994), p. 257.

improved economic circumstances of millions of Americans helped facilitate an increased interest in participatory leisure pursuits such as golfing, gardening and hunting, and a further lifestyle change that went hand in hand with these shifts in popular leisure activities, the mass exodus of millions of white Americans to the nation's rapidly expanding suburbs, which by 1960 were as populous as its cities.[4] For the movie industry this mass relocation meant the loss of a large proportion of potential customers, as the vast majority cinema auditoria were located in urban areas and no longer in easy reach of the new and predominantly young suburban upper-working and middle classes.

Television ownership was a major causal factor of the decline from the early to mid-1950s onwards. At the beginning of the decade it was a relative luxury enjoyed by comparatively few households; 3.875 million in 1950. This figure had leapt to 20.4 million three years later and continued rising at a rapid rate, so by the end of the decade 90 per cent of homes had television sets.[5] However, although the rise of television adversely affected cinema-going, it did provide another income stream for Hollywood studios. The precedent was set in 1955 when WOR-TV, an independent New York television station, began to present old RKO Pictures titles on its *Million Dollar Movie* show. This opportunity arose following the acquisition of the ailing studio by the General Tire and Rubber Company the year before. The arrangement produced healthy profits and over the following two years all the other majors cut similar deals.[6] By the end of the decade, millions of Americans could tune in to network television channels and watch a wide range of pre-1948, mainly black and white talkies on regular shows such as *The Late Show* and *Saturday Night at the Movies*. From around the mid-1960s

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[4] Richard Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States since 1938* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 127. Driving this demographic trend were bigger houses, open space and better schools, and making it a practical reality for many was car ownership, which rose steeply rose from 69,500 in 1945 to 7.9 million in 1955. See Belton, *American Cinema*, pp. 259-60.

[5] Belton, *American Cinema*, p. 258.

[6] Douglas Gomery, 'Motion Picture Exhibition in 1970s America', in Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 409.

onwards, with the gradual shift towards colour, many post-1948 films were added to the slate of movies on offer and were enjoyed by even bigger audiences.[7] As we shall see, the unprecedented access to a broad section of Hollywood films, both good, bad and mediocre, played a key part shaping attitudes towards cinema and production trends of the New Hollywood era.

Along with the issue of declining audiences, the major Hollywood studios were faced with the concurrent break-up of the studio system, in the wake of the 1948 Paramount decree.[8] The studios' response to these changes was to place a greater emphasis upon a small number of big budget, 'special event' releases, or 'Roadshow' movies, and continue targeting cinema's traditional family audience.[9] For almost two decades between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, moreover, it was policy that produced healthy financial returns, with films such as the biblical epic *The Ten Commandments* (1956) or wartime musical *South Pacific* (1958) regularly topping the annual box office hit lists. However, a series of high profile flops in the mid- to late 1960s, that included the musicals *Star!* (1968), *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968) and *Darling Lili* (1970) signaled the end of the Roadshow era, and pushed the industry into a recession in 1969 that lasted until the end of 1971. With traditional family audiences in steep decline, Hollywood would become increasingly dependent upon cinema's 'youth' segment as a key source of revenue. This segment centred around the 'new audience', who were

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[7] Ibid., p. 410

[8] The Paramount decree handed down by the Supreme court on the 4 May 1948, ruled that the big studios' domination of the movie industry through the vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition, was a violation of anti-trust laws, and marked the beginning of the end of the old studio system. The result of the decision was that the studios were forced to end their control of the exhibition sector, and sell off the hundreds of movie theatres under their ownership. See Belton, *American Cinema*, p. 258.

[9] The rationale behind this model was the recognition that for an increasing number of Americans movie-going was no longer the habitual leisure activity that it used to be, a major socio-cultural shift which necessitated the promotion of movie-going as a 'special event'. The 'roadshow' format dated back to the silent period and was designed to build awareness and interest by exhibiting a movie in a limited number of theatres in major cities, often on extended runs, prior to general release. The films themselves exploited technological innovations such as widescreen and 3-D processes, attractions that also served as key distinctions between the experience of watching cinema and television. See Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 128-30 + 159-61.

better educated, more diverse, and neither shared the conservative cultural values nor the attitude towards cinema of their parents' generation, or what had hitherto constituted Hollywood's core general audience.

The development of the 'youth' audience closely paralleled wider developments within American society. Marked by political assassinations, social conflict, and widespread civil unrest, the 1960s was the most turbulent and divisive period in American history since the Civil War. The optimism of the first few years of the decade began to drain away after the country's young and dynamic president, John F. Kennedy, was shot down in Dallas on 22 November, 1963, and a generational divide became increasingly evident over America's controversial interventionist war in Vietnam, and societal issues such as race, women's rights, sexual mores and the country's culture of material acquisition. Reacting against the conformity and complacency of the previous decade, the 'youth' went in revolt. Politically this was manifested in the rise of radical or left-liberal political groups and organisations, such as the New Left. But changes in cultural attitudes and mores amongst young Americans were more widespread, and centred upon a 'counterculture' of alternative communities, drugs, sexual liberation, and the non-doctrinaire belief in peace, love and personal freedom that burgeoned in the second half of the 1960s. The riot outside the 1968 Chicago Democratic convention between various protest groups and the police, was a climactic moment during a period of widespread violence and unrest and sent shockwaves through the nation. The same year republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon was voted into power on a law and order ticket. In 1969, Nixon famously appealed to the country's 'silent majority', a constituency of social conservatives made up predominantly of older Americans and white blue collar Americans, who were morally outraged by the anti-war protesters and the counterculture. The nature and extent of the generational/ideological discord requires qualification, however, and it would be facile to divide 1960s American society into two opposing factions, as the picture is evidently far more complex. Consider the

anti-war movement, for example, which although consisting predominantly of under-30 year olds, did not reflect the stance of many other young Americans who were either neutral or supported the conflict. Likewise, not all over-30 year olds were pro-war. In fact, the anti-war movement or the New Left, as well as the 'counterculture', more accurately expressed the anti-establishment and anti-materialist views and sentiments of a cohort of privileged, mainly white, college educated baby-boomers, part of a generation born after the Second World War that were reaching late adolescence or early adulthood in the mid to late 1960s. The impact of this loose socio-cultural/political grouping was, nevertheless, significant, and the activism, identity politics, cultural attitudes and radical lifestyle choices, they adopted and embraced, created a sense of widespread change that continued well into the 1970s and beyond.[10]

Fig 1.1 Chaotic scenes outside the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago

[10] For two compelling histories of the period see Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

Centrist, liberal, left-wing and countercultural baby-boomers and young pre-baby boomers, often college educated, accounted for the solid majority of the new audience, the sizable and influential core of America's cinema's expanding 'youth' segment. Males moreover outnumbered females: a 1969 survey claimed that 50 per cent of cinema audiences were 16-24 year olds males.[11] Middle-aged film fans of a certain intellectual disposition were also included amongst its number.[12] As this figure indicates, both in spite and because of the trend towards viewing movies on television, the New Audience had a strong preference for the authentic collective social experience of viewing a film on a large screen at their local cinema. The abundant offerings that had become available on network television supplemented rather than supplanted their passion for cinema-going. Yet, crucially, as critics have noted, the access to hundreds of old films of a hugely varying quality nevertheless engendered a major perceptual shift. It undermined America's dominant cultural myths, and led to the corresponding emergence of an increasingly ironic attitude towards Hollywood's traditional paradigms.[13]

The type of films that were popular with this segment were foreign imports, independent American cinema, the formally bold or experimental offerings of the New Hollywood, as well as revivals of productions from the 1920s to the 1950s, which, up until the mid-1960s, were typically enjoyed in small to medium size 'art house' cinemas.[14] Indeed, many of these films qualified as art in the minds of the audience as opposed to solely 'entertainment', or, put another way, 'cinema' rather than 'movies', a critical distinction often based on an informed appreciation of film 'authorship'.

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[11] Drew Casper, *Hollywood Film 1963-1976: Years of Revolution and Reaction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 59.

[12] Ibid.; Males under the age of 40 made up 75% of cinema audiences.

[13] For a cogent assessment of this phenomenon see Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 263-7.

[14] The number of 'art house' cinemas peaked at 650 in 1966; Casper, *Hollywood Film*, p. 59.

Guidance in defining and refining this critical distinction was provided by a proliferation of book publications on film history and aesthetics, cinema retrospectives and vibrant critical discourse in the nation's press.[15] The concurrent growth in film societies and college programs were two other important developments that fostered an academic interest in and ironic attitude towards cinema and its history amongst America's younger generation. In 1964, there were 4,000 film societies on the nation's college campuses drawing their membership from approximately 2.5 million students. By 1968, 1500 film courses were on offered across 120 campuses, attracting 60,000 enrollees. Four years later, the number of courses had risen to 5,899, and by 1978 it had increased again to 10,000, which were on offer at 1000 schools.[16]

Yet in spite of the growth in cinema as an intellectual pursuit, the direct pleasures the medium offered remained a fundamental attraction for the country's 'youth' audience. Crucially, however, these pleasures differed from those favoured by their parent's generation. Often of a violent or sexual nature, these were key qualities of foreign art house films or independent American movies, and marked the emergence of 'the cinema of sensation', a new aesthetic tendency characterised by faster editing and powerful imagery. Paul Monaco writes:

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[15] The 'auteur theory' was originally expounded by the French Cahiers Critics in 1950s and the influential film critic Andrew Sarris the author of *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968* (1968), became its major American proponent. The new audience created a burgeoning demand for books on film history and aesthetics during the 1960s, and Sarris' seminal work, which places directors in a hierarchy of categories based on the author's assessment of their personal style and the 'wholeness' of their art, was the most important, influential and audacious in convincing many Americans to start taking Hollywood film seriously. The various film retrospectives of 'pantheon directors' such as Orson Welles, Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock at the New York Theatre and the city's Museum of Modern Art during the 1960s, organised by Sarris, and two critics his writing influenced, Peter Bogdanovich and Eugene Archer, further served this end. Sarris also wrote for New York's *Village Voice*, and was among an upper echelon of esteemed film critics, that included Pauline Kael (*The New Yorker*) and Stanley Kauffman (*The New Republic*), whose persuasive and frequently disputatious reviews and essays profoundly shaped the tastes and opinions of young cineastes. Kael's long-standing feud with Sarris over the auteur theory, which she contended, amongst a range of criticisms, was elitist and failed to acknowledge the collaborative nature of filmmaking, was a lively feature of the critical discourse.

[16] See Casper, *Hollywood Film,* p. 60, and Belton, *American Cinema*, p. 301.

> In Hollywood feature production during the 1960s, the aesthetics of a cinema of sensation that emphasised increasingly graphic visual depictions and effects began to coexist alongside the classic cinema of sentiment and spectacle. American feature films became more visceral visually, and less traditionally dramatic and dialogue bound. Cinematographers experimented with grittier, more realistic looks and laid the groundwork for filming with decidedly lower light levels than had been demanded by classic three-point lighting for that sleek Hollywood look.[17]

'Exploitation' movies were integral to this development, and Alfred Hitchcock's horror masterpiece *Psycho* (1960), an early exemplar of this emerging aesthetic tendency that borrowed heavily from this approach. Produced by independent companies outside of the film industry's mainstream, such as the highly successful American International Pictures (AIP), 'exploitation' movies were aimed at teenagers, a niche market that flourished during the 1950s and 1960s. The films were low budget, sensational, high in moral shock value and put on simultaneous release in as many cinemas as possible to circumvent poor word of mouth, a practice dubbed saturation booking. Socially, they had a broad appeal amongst cinema's 'youth' demographic, but middle class, new audience types were more likely to adopt a 'camp' interest in most exploitation pictures. In the press they were largely dismissed. That is, except for the work of Roger Corman, AIP's foremost director and mentor to many of the 'movie brat' directors of the Hollywood New Wave, including Peter Bogdanovich, Martin Scorcese and Francis Ford Coppola. Corman's motorcycle/protest film, *The Wild Angels* (1966) made it onto the program of the prestigious Venice Film Festival in Italy, demonstrating the blurring of the boundary between 'high' and 'low' art, or 'sensation' and 'seriousness', that gathered momentum at the end of the 1960s.[18]

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[17] Paul Monaco, *The Sixties: 1960-1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 261.

[18] Ibid., pp. 27-9 + 261.

Fig 1.2 *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)

The following year, two unexpected 'youth' hits *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967) a film about an aimless and alienated college graduate, and *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) which turned the infamous crime couple into countercultural folk heroes, marked a major turning point for American film and the beginning of the New Hollywood era.[19] As Hollywood's financial problems began deepen, these successes alerted the industry to the substantial financial potential of the 'youth' market, and offered an unprecedented opportunity to a group of young and relatively untried filmmakers, that included Corman's proteges, as well as bringing to the fore a number of older directors, such as Arthur Penn and Robert Altman, whose films resonated with the taste, attitudes and values of this segment. Many of the New Hollywood filmmakers either started out working in television or were graduates of film school, and stylistically they drew upon the realist aesthetic of post-war documentary film, the mannerist innovations of 1960s television, and the modernist sensibilities of post-war European new wave cinema and its questioning of classical narrative and generic conventions. As a consequence, an increasing number of personal, self-conscious and socially-critical movies began to appear. This is exemplified by the 'youth-cult' film cycle that appeared in the wake of the massive success of *Easy Rider* (1969), a film

[19] *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde* made $49 million and $24.1 million in rentals, respectively; Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 497.

heavily influenced by AIP and Roger Corman.[20] More widely established genres, such as the western, were variously revised, 'corrected' and parodied. Compared to the clear cause and effect stories and goal-oriented protagonists of classical period film, the narrative structure of New Wave films tended to be looser and more open ended, and revolve around ambiguous and alienated anti-heroes. Key themes were the closing of the 'Frontier' and encroaching modernity. Allusions to European New Wave cinema and Classical Hollywood films and genres abounded, sustenance for the new audience. Reaction to this surge of liberalism in Hollywood filmmaking emerged in the form of a cycle of popular 'right-wing' films in the 1970s, such as the 'vigilante' cop movie *Dirty Harry* (1971) and its sequels, broadly articulated the concerns of America's 'silent majority', by rejecting the frontier's closing and advocating direct action as a solution to societal ills. But, as Robert Ray notes, the differences between the 'left' and 'right' cycles were ostensible, because '[U]ltimately ...both shared the same mythology, with its predisposition to regard events in terms of the reconciliatory pattern's abiding advocacy of individualism'.[21] The contradictory nature of mainstream film during the late 1960s and early 1970s was an important cultural pre-condition of the movies about the movies trend. Ray writes:

> The radical fashions of the 1960s and 1970s concealed the obvious: the traditional American mythology had survived as the generally accepted account of America's history and future. Thus, the "New" American Cinema - superficially radical and internally conservative - perfectly represented its audiences ambivalent relationship to the period's developments. Like the counterculture with its western imagery (the outlaw hero, for example), Hollywood mobilised

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[20] *Easy Rider* made $19.1 million in rentals; ibid.

[21] Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 296.

> renovated versions of its traditional genres and heroes to satisfy the audience's schizophrenic impulses toward irony and nostalgia.[22]

Censorship, or relaxation thereof, also had a major impact on mainstream filmmaking at the time. By the early 1950s, the Motion Picture Production Code, the set of industry censorship guidelines established in 1930, had began to be challenged by a number of films, and during the 1960s, an increasing number of films tested the limits of what was permissible on the cinema screen. The popularity of foreign films in the country's 'art house' sector, many of which exhibited a liberal attitude towards sex and its depiction, such as *La Dolce Vita* (1960), was an early sign of a shift in moral and cultural tastes and subsequently affirmed by mainstream Hollywood releases. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) was rated R (18 certificate) owing to a screenplay heavy with expletives, but nonetheless grossed $14.5 million at the box office. Likewise, in the following year the violence and sexual content of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) pushed the boundaries of the Production Code and finished the year's fifth highest grosser. By the second half of the 1960s many prominent figures in Hollywood, including the MPPA's new president, Jack Valenti, considered the Production Code to be out of step with America's changing social mores, and attitudes towards sex and violence. It was also contrary to freedom of expression, a basic democratic right. As an issue that mainly affected the type of films favoured by cinema's growth market, the under-25 year old segment, the old censorship regulations were, moreover, viewed as an impediment to improving the industry's economic health, a further factor that eased the passage of the new Code and Ratings Administration (CARA) which took effect on 1 November, 1968.[23]

Under the new regulations all films were to carry a rating of suitability, from "G" (for general audience) through to "X" (over 17 year olds only), a system that made it easier

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[22] Ibid., p. 300.

[23] Monaco, *The Sixties*, pp. 56-66.

to control and restrict admission to films. But by the same token it provided categories and thereby granted official approval to films that would have been rejected under the Production Code for their vulgarity, sexual explicitness or violent imagery, and from a moral and ethical standpoint this produced mixed results. On the one hand, it was 'responsible for the realistic portrayal of complex humanity', as Casper observes, but, on the other hand, it was also 'accountable for unbridled exploitation, tastelessness and crudity.'[24] Three genres assigned to the latter category, at least by the majority of mainstream observers, were black action films or 'blaxploitation', martial arts films and hardcore porno movies. The promise of taboo breaking depictions of sex and violence were their prime selling points, and their popularity in the early 1970s was indicative of the key outcome of the ratings system: the mainstreaming of exploitation. The super hit *Jaws* (1975), for example, recalls the b-movie monster format popularised by AIP, but with much higher production values. The mainstreaming of hardcore porn reached its apogee in 1972 with the success of the infamous *Deep Throat*, a picture made for $24,000 which earned a staggering $20 million, thanks largely to its crossover appeal to middle class cinema-goers.[25]

The outcome of these developments for the film industry was thus double-edged. On the one hand it provided a vital source of revenue for the industry, but on the other hand, it put-off many female viewers from going to the cinema and alienated and scandalised older, more conservative minded citizens.[26] It is important to note that throughout this period Hollywood continued to produce a range of mainstream movies, such as the romantic drama *Love Story* (1970), the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (1970) and the action thriller *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) that conformed more closely to the requirements of the old Production Code, and catered for a broad market, including the

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[24] Casper, *Hollywood Cinema*, p. 128.

[25] Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 275.

[26] Krämer,, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower, 2005), p. 66.

middle aged and/or family audience. But the mainstreaming of exploitation and 'youth' films meant that the type of filmmaking that had previously existed on the margins of the American film scene, now accounted for an increasing proportion of the major's weekly releases, a shift considered in some traditional quarters as symptomatic of wider moral decline. Attempting to maximise the potential of the exploitation/'youth' film niche, moreover, was not a long term solution to the problem of declining audience numbers. Hollywood was thus compelled to formulate strategies of luring cinema-goers, such as those turned off by the more explicit and sensational film releases, back into the cinema, and discover a formula that would appeal to a general audience. The nostalgia film was one such strategy which fed off and reinforced a wider cultural craze in the 1970s circulated in music, film, theatre, television, fashion, print media and advertising, and based upon the style, behaviour and cultural customs of the 1920s to the 1950s.[27]

Reflecting the consensus amongst contemporary cultural commentators, James Paris wrote of the nostalgia boom, 'with all the confusion, alienation, and unrest in the present, Americans have a longing to return to... an imagined past...where the world seemed more comfortable, reassuring and manageable.'[28] The contemporary reality of the country's disastrous interventionist war in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, and economic instability all fueled the desire to look back to decades gone by, and Hollywood, the nation's preeminent repository of popular cultural memory, was well placed to exploit this impulse. With regards to the trend for movies about movies, a major outgrowth of the wider nostalgia wave, a feature in the conservative *U.S. News and World Report*, pointed to the growth in cinema courses at college, the popularity of film studio tours and the thriving market for old costumes and props as indicators of the burgeoning interest in Hollywood's past. 'All this proves that America has a great need

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[27] For a contemporary article on the wider nostalgia craze see 'A Life Special: Nostalgia', *Life*, 19 February 1971, and on the nostalgia film, see John Russell Taylor, 'Were Those the Days?', *American Film*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1977), 20-23.

[28] James Paris, 'How Hollywood's Memory's Plays Tricks on Us', *The New York Times*, 23 November 1975, p. 15.

for the movies', observed MPPA president Jack Valenti. 'People are looking for giants - heroes who can be emulated - and the movies happen to be full of actors who at least play the role well.'[29] This broad trend was also 'a reaction against the often humourless "social consciousness" movement of the 1960s', the article contended, citing how deeply affected a group of USC film students were when shown a number of 'relatively gentle movies of the 1930s'. Arthur Knight, the course teacher, 'was particularly impressed because it was an era when students were supposed to be militant and "tough"'.[30] Another commentator ascribed this type of response to the audience's wearying of the lax morality and elitist attitudes of many 'youth' orientated films. Compared to contemporary movies, characterised as having 'sex on the brain', 'sitcom awareness' and 'put down humour designed to separate the dummies from the cognoscenti', by Charles Michener in *Newsweek*, 'the sophistication of high kitsch like "Dinner for Eight" (1933) was inclusive not exclusive, unpretentiously oblique, not assaultive.'[31] Broad generational distinctions remain, however, with the strong likelihood that the pleasures of such studio era pictures for young cineastes would be self-conscious and an opportunity to test their knowledge; '[O]ne of the side benefits of watching old movies', notes Michener, 'is that they encourage us to feel superior to our parents: we may not be as confident as they are but we're smarter.'[32]

The evidence of a backlash notwithstanding, the values and sensibilities of the 'youth' segment had nevertheless become firmly embedded in the mainstream over the course of the decade. The majority of movies about movies of the mid- to late 1970s, thus, attempted to 'play it both ways', or, as McBride observes, negotiate the 'problem of creating believable fables for skeptical modern audiences without denying the still-

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[29] Quoted in 'Hollywood's Latest: Movies About Movies', *US News and World Report*, 15 March 1976, p. 40.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Charles Michener, 'Old Movies Again', *Newsweek*, 31 May 1976, p. 39.

[32] Ibid.

potent, romantic lure of Hollywood.'[33] These included documentaries, comedies, biopics, romantic melodramas and thrillers, and were variously configured to reconcile ironic or cynical attitudes towards Hollywood, and the contradictory impulse for nostalgia escape. *That's Entertainment* (1974), for example, a film at the vanguard of this trend, had intrinsic crossover appeal. Overtly playing upon contemporary disillusionment and alienation with its the advertising slogan, 'Boy, do we need it now!', this compilation of excerpts from MGM musicals from the 1920s through the 1950s, was a major hit, earning $19.1 million in rentals.[34] The attraction for cinema-goers was two-fold: the unabashed nostalgia of films such as *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949) or *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), and segment hosts that included Fred Astaire and Frank Sinatra, particularly for those who were grew up during the studio era, and for many of the baby-boomers in the audience it was the camp value and inherent artifice of the genre.[35] *Movie Movie* (1978), a 'double bill' consisting of a boxing movie and a musical comedy, and one of a number of comic parodies in this broad grouping, similarly alludes to present concerns pertaining to the controversial content of contemporary filmmaking. Recalling a time when 'the boy always got the girl, crime didn't pay, and the only four letter word in a movie house was 'exit'', the introduction to the film by the comedian George Burns, nostalgically refers to the film's studio-era influences. While it closely replicates the visual style or 'look' of 1930s and 1940s black and white movies, it employs the dialogue to send-up the sensibilities of the period's filmmaking. 1970s movie biopics included *Gable and Lombard* (1976) and *W.C. Fields and Me* (1976), two frank portrayals of classic period stars which both end in tragedy. Neither was a big success at the box office, an outcome predicted by McBride who remarked 'impressions of famous stars, even by accomplished actors, have seldom worked on screen', and, one can assume, attributable in part to the cinema-

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[33] Joseph McBride, 'The Glory That Was Hollywood', *American Film*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1975), p. 54.

[34] Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 499.

[35] James Monaco, 'That's Entertainment', *Take One* IV (1974), 38-39.

going public's familiarity with the faces and talents of these performers from reissues on television.[36] Finally, fictional dramas and thrillers about the movie industry, set or part set in Hollywood, included *The Way We Were* (1973), *The Great Waldo Pepper* (1975), *The Day of the Locust* (1975), and *Inserts* (1976). Directed by John Byrum, the unconventional 1930s-set *Inserts*, is a film that is influenced by and comments upon contemporary 'exploitation' practices. About a silent film director who has failed to make the transition to sound, the picture takes place almost entirely in one room of his dilapidated mansion, where he shoots pornographic movies. 'The very fact that *Inserts* was made at all,' observes Barris, 'indicates the extent to which movie nostalgia had become a marketable by the mid-1970s. It failed commercially to be sure, but obviously its backers thought that it had a chance of success.'[37]

The Day of the Locust (1975): Issues of adaptation

If *That's Entertainment* was the most celebratory of the movies about the movies that appeared in the mid- to late 1970s, the most cynical was John Schlesinger's *The Day of the Locust*, adapted from Nathaniel West's 1939 novel. The contrasts between these two productions were indicative of the conflicting ideologies in contemporary film more generally in the early to mid-1970s, and 'reflected the perceived split between commercial cinema and those that appealed to specialised audiences fueled by auteurism, the art cinema and countercultural values.'[38] Schlesinger's film belonged to the latter category, which was broadly critical of America, its institutions and the country's traditional mythology, and included the historical films *Barry Lyndon*, *Mandingo* and *Shampoo* (all 1975). A range of ongoing crises sustained this questioning

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[36] McBride, 'The Glory'.

[37] Alex Barris, *Hollywood According to Hollywood* (South Brunswick, NJ: A. S. Barnes, 1978), p. 199.

[38] Glenn Mann, '1975: Movies and Conflicting Ideologies', in Lester D. Friedman (ed.), *American Cinema of the 1970s: Themes and Variations*, *Screen Decades* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 135.

stance in the 1970s : the national traumas of Vietnam and the Watergate Scandal, the oil crisis and the economic recession it induced, and social tensions over the campaigns of women's groups and civil rights organisations to change federal and state law, such as the forced integration of schools.[39]

First establishing himself as a director of note as part of the British new wave of the late 1950s and early 1960s, with *A Kind of Loving* (1962) and *Billy Liar* (1963), John Schlesinger became associated with the Hollywood new wave following his Oscar winning hit *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). The director originally expressed an interest in Nathanael West's mordant novel about the Hollywood dream factory in 1967. Drawing upon the writer's experiences working as a screenwriter for Republic during the 1930s, the novel is about the illusory nature of the movies, and is told from the perspective of those struggling at the broad base of the Hollywood pyramid. The central theme of this book and his other writing, the American Dream corrupted, was profoundly shaped by the tragedy and despair of the Great Depression, and gained a wide currency amidst the socio-political turbulence of the 1960s. This theme along with the absurdity, irony and sardonic wit with which the author debunked this myth, moreover, was a precursor of the modernist style and sensibilities of the New Hollywood auteur cinema, and its revisionist and parodic approach to established genres. Securing funding for what many considered an 'anti-Hollywood tract', however, proved difficult, until Paramount finally green lighted the project in June 1974.[40] Fundamentally, the studio's decision was based on the director's prior success. But it was perhaps also based on an understanding of the 'built-in contradiction' that distinguishes the moving image from the written word with

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Kenn Rand, 'Behind the scenes of 'The Day of the Locust'', *American Cinematographer*, vol. 56, no. 6 (1975), p. 653. Warners, the studio that funded and distributed *Midnight Cowboy*, initially backed the project.

regards to 'Hollywood'; that 'Hollywood novels.....tell a less flattering story than movies about Hollywood.'[41]

A further determining factor was that the 'youth' market, and the production of films that channeled the anti-establishment feelings and countercultural values of this demographic, had become an industry priority. Robert Evans, Paramount's young production chief, was at the forefront of this broad strategic shift in Hollywood, and his decision to promote new talent and foster creative freedom was rewarded with a string of critical and commercial successes. *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather Part II* (1974), and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), were among the fruits of this policy, and helped cement the auteurist credentials of their respective directors, Francis Ford Coppola and Roman Polanski. Schlesinger's creative flair and personal vision fitted this mould, but Evans was not keen on the director or his preferred project. But Frank Yablans, Paramount's president, intervened, arguing that the director's ability to tackle difficult or unconventional subject matter, such as West's novel, had been demonstrated by *Midnight Cowboy*: the director and his Oscar-winning team of the producer Monte Hellman, and the screenwriter Waldo Salt, had faithfully adapted James Leo Herlihy's similarly downbeat novel into a critical and commercial success. Another factor cited as influencing Paramount's decision to back the project was *The Day of the Locust*'s Depression-era setting, which along with *The Great Gatsby* (1974) and *Chinatown* (1974) fitted Paramount's 'cycle of interest' in films set between 1920 and 1945. These three prestige productions, it was believed, would provide a cachet for the studio within the industry and in the eyes of the audience, and create a mutually beneficial historical focus for the production and promotion of each film.[42]

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[41] Ames, *Movies About*, p. 225.

[42] *The New York Times Magazine*, 2 June 1974, JRS/8/28, John Schlesinger Papers, The British Film Institute Library, London.

The thematic parallels between *The Day of the Locust* and Schlesinger's previous two films, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971), indicate a number of the director's central preoccupations and the reasons why he was attracted to West's novel. Loneliness, alienation, false dreams, and the friendship and concern for another man, are all key themes shared by these three films, and constitute an attitude or approach underlying Schlesinger's work, described one reviewer as 'positive pessimism'.[43] The director on the Hollywood portrayed in the film's source novel:

> It *is* a dark world- savage and hard-edged, yet I didn't subscribe totally to the view that is depressing. I see some hope in the book. I see people who cling stubbornly and tenaciously to their dreams and I like that, I always have. I see characters who are resilient and, in their way, quite brave. They cope and carry on, and after all, isn't that what much of life is all about?[44]

Schlesinger and production designer Richard MacDonald settled on a combination of location shooting in and around Hollywood, and scenes filmed on the Paramount lot. Having featured in many films and articles about the American film industry, many of the locations are well known to cinema-goers, and bear various meanings in relation to the myths and metaphors of 'Hollywood'. These physical 'signs', moreover, are an integral part of the illusory world West describes, and include Vine street, Musso and Frank Grill, a major haunt of the movie industry's movers and shakers since the silent period, The Normandie Towers built by Charlie Chaplin, the Mayan-influenced Ennis House designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the early 1920s, the Hollywood Palladium and the iconic Hollywood sign high in the hills above Griffith Park.[45] As signifiers of the Hollywood myth, these buildings and locations underpin the paradoxical qualities of

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[43] A. Leigh Charlton, 'Babylon Visited', *UCLA Daily Bruin*, 15 May 1975, JRS/8/28, Schlesinger/BFI.

[44] 'Paramount Pictures Handbook of Production Information', JRS/8/22, Schlesinger/BFI.

[45] 'A Look at Hollywood's Golden Era', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 Dec 1973, JRS/8/10, Schlesinger/BFI.

the movie about the movies. The Hollywood sign, a preeminent physical symbol of the American myth of success, is described by a tour guide in the film as a 'Mammoth metal monument to this mecca of broken dreams'.

Of the major sets constructed on the Paramount lot for this film, by far the largest and most expensive is a replica of the exterior of the famous Grauman's Chinese theatre and its Hollywood Boulevard locale.[46] This is the location of the film's final apocalyptic sequence, wherein Homer Simpson's frenzied and fatal attack on his tormentor, Adore, sparks a mass riot outside the premiere of *The Buccaneer* (1938). Aptly, the film is set during a time of conflict, the War of 1812 between the Americans and the British, and is directed by Cecil B. DeMille, a figure synonymous with the Hollywood epic and one of the grand architects of movie mythology. The other two major sets are the San Bernadino Arms, and the soundstage that constitutes the film within a film sequence. The "San Berdoo" is 'a full square Hollywood block of "magnificently crumbling" lower middle class gentility', where many of the film's Hollywood hopefuls live and languish on their quest for romance.[47] The 'Battle of Waterloo', the film's other major action sequence, is an example of where these fantasies are enacted. The catastrophic collapse of the set during the shooting of this film within the film, presages the later riot. Seeing behind the scenes is both a source of pleasure for the audience and, of course, functions to reveal the artifice of cinema.

The visual style of the *Day of the Locust* attempts to reconcile the contradictory aims of commercial appeal and a visual strategy consonant with West's outsider's view of Hollywood, and illustrates a key paradoxical quality of the movie about the movies. Shooting in black and white was the original plan. With its connotations of empirical

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[46] The entire sequence took two weeks to shoot, employed 1000 extras, and cost approximately $1,000,000; Rand, 'Behind the scenes', p. 692.

[47] Ibid., p. 653.

truth or 'realism', this aesthetic approach was considered most appropriate to West's story of the American film industry's fringe players and its dissection of Hollywood artifice.[48] 'West's grotesques are simple reality' wrote Schlesinger; the 'material is bizarre enough [and] incidents are colourful enough that we should avoid overstating anything.'[49] Following the assignment of the cinematographer Conrad L. Hall to work on the picture, however, the director was persuaded to abandon the idea of employing a gritty realist aesthetic in his adaptation of West's work. A few years earlier, Hall had employed a similar approach to another film that focuses on the underbelly of American society, John Huston's *Fat City* (1972). Huston's film is a grim story of hope and despair on the small time professional boxing circuit in run down Stockton, California, and won the director many plaudits in the press but did not fare well at the box office. 'Making it so hard-edged and "real",' Hall reflected, 'contributed to the fact that it ended up as something that people wanted to avert their eyes from'; a response made more acute by the country's economic downturn and the financial uncertainty many confronting millions of Americans. 'It was a case of: "Who wants to know about your life going down the drain, when most people's are anyway?" writes Hall.[50]

With this precedent in mind, the cinematographer and director instead decided to formulate a visual approach that manifested the character's fantasies of success, glamour and celebrity. They settled on a controlled use of colour, with an emphasis on browns, creams and beiges, or 'sepia' tones. Softened by the use of nets and silks over the camera lense, techniques Hall picked up from working with old time cameramen, this imagery is also imbued with a sensual, somewhat overripe quality by the Californian sunshine.[51] As opposed to the glossier excesses of the early 1970s nostalgia

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[48]James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, Updated and expanded ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 170.

[49] 'Notes on Day of the Locust', JRS/8/7, Schlesinger/BFI, p. 3.

[50] 'Photographing "The Day of the Locust"', *American Cinematographer*, vol. 56, no.6 (1975), pp. 655-7.

[51] Ibid., pp. 675 + 722.

wave, the film's visual strategy achieved more of 'golden' aesthetic. Yet it was also clearly a tactical gambit that played on the contemporaneous popularity of warm and gauzy representations of the past, to make the film appeal to a broader audience. Juxtaposed with the crumbling 'San Berdoo' and the forlorn hopes of its residents, however, the nostalgic potential of the film's romanticised view of Hollywood self-reflexively assumes a critical edge. For these characters, working on the studio back lots amongst the grandiose sets and glamourous costumes as an extra or occasional bit part player may bring them in closer proximity to this dream, but it is a transitory pleasure and small compensation for the lives they must endure. Indeed, the boredom, frustration and bitterness arising from the hollow fantasies Hollywood holds we are led to believe, furthermore, breeds violence, the film's central theme. Consonant with the film's jaundiced view of Hollywood and its attendant myths, the film also deploys stylistic strategies to convey repression and alienation. The former is inherent in the gothic interiors used to develop the characterisation of Homer Simpson (Donald Sutherland), a lonely accountant living in Hollywood who falls for the aspiring actress Faye Greener (Sharon Black).

A key structural feature of film is the series of violent or threatening scenes, such as 'The Battle of Waterloo' sequence, culminating in the mass riot on Hollywood Boulevard. The novel, however, does not explicitly relate these sequences or the wider narrative to the political conflicts of the period. Given the book's absurd humour, West considered this type of content neither appropriate nor possible, and it was thus avoided.[52] Schlesinger and his production team, on the other hand, decided adding explicit allusions to the wider events of the period, namely the Great Depression, and the rise of Hitler and imminent war in Europe, would 'enrich' individual scenes and 'make necessary', or in other words, bring the weight and significance of history to

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[52] Alistair Wisker, *The Writing of Nathanael West* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 96.

bear, on 'the final surreal image of LA burning'.[53] The film contains many such references: the character Harry Greener (Burgess Meredith), an old washed-up vaudevillian clown who never managed to get decent break in Hollywood, for example, is turned into an anti-semite, bitterly attributing his lack of success to 'not being one of them'. Another example is the drag show sequence adapted from West's novel, which is significant because it alludes to another popular film of the era, *Cabaret* (1972), the Bob Fosse directed musical set in and around Berlin's fictional Kit Kat club in the early 1930s. Such allusions were a key attraction for the new audience, and the performance of 'Hot Voodoo' by the male impersonator, a song pertinently based on the idea of spiritual possession, intertextually references Fosse's film. Combining escapism, satire and political commentary, musical cabaret was a popular and vibrant form of cultural expression during the Weimar period, and is employed in the movie to advance the narrative and to develop its central themes of corruption, decadence and false dreams.

Images of authenticity, illusion and disaster

The film's narrative is filtered through the consciousness and experience of Tod Hackett played by William Atherton, a young, Yale-educated production designer newly arrived in town and its mediating link between an insider's and outsider's view of the Hollywood dream factory. The latter perspective is the overwhelming concern of West's novel and is manifested in an array of characters existing on the fringes of the American film industry, including the film's two other central roles Faye Greener and Homer Simpson. Faye Greener is a stereotype of an insecure and unsuccessful actress whose performance is a pastiche of the mannerisms and behaviour of the female stars she aspires to emulate. She is also a shameless tease who is pursued by Tod, Earle, a movie cowboy stereotype, and his friend Miguel. Homer Simpson is a guileless, god-fearing Christian from Des Moines, Iowa, who similarly falls under the young actress' spell,

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[53] 'Notes', JRS/8/7, BFI/Schlesinger, p. 3.

only to be cruelly abused by her after they become romantically involved. Although he harbours no ambitions to make it in the movies, he is a Hollywood outsider by virtue of having recently moved to Los Angeles, and his naive adoration of Faye, an illusion of an illusion, provides a further layer of mediation in support of the film's central theme. The discovery of Miguel and Faye *en flagrante* shatters this illusion, and precipitates his emotional breakdown and decision to leave Los Angeles. The story's insider is Claude Estee, the jaded head of Paramount's art department and Tod's boss. Estee introduces the aspiring art director to a decadent world of champagne, expensive cars and high class 'sporting houses', and the unethical underbelly of a tough and uncaring business.

The authenticity of the film, inasmuch as it brings to mind the 1930s though the lens of the 1970 historical film, is greatly enhanced by the demeanour and appearance of William Atherton. Atherton, more than any other role in the film, is 'displaced in time', or a good example of 'period casting'. Such actors, explains Christine Sprengler, 'through looks, voices as well as mannerisms and movement - can do much to evoke and carry into a film nostalgia for these facets of the cinema's past and the mythic and historical realities it purports to represent.'[54] During the mid- to late 1970s, Atherton appeared in two other historical films, *The Class of '44* (1974) and the disaster movie, *The Hindenberg* (1975). In contrast to the heroic and self-possessed leading men of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Errol Flynn or Tyrone Power, however, Atherton's persona in the film reflects the vogue for anguished, conflicted, and morally ambiguous protagonists during the late 1960s and 1970s. In fact, Tod is more observer than narrative agent; he lives through the events in the film but does very little to influence them. The juxtaposition of Atherton's 'period' appearance and his 1970s persona is thus another paradoxical quality in play in John Schlesinger's movie about the movies. A similar contradictory quality imbues the performance of the veteran actors Abe Kusich

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[54] Christine Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), pp. 80-3.

and Burgess Meredith, who play the big-talking dwarf actor, Billy Barty, and Faye's father Harry Greener, an old, washed-up comedian forced to sell the aptly named 'miracle solvent' door to door to make ends meet. The casting of Kusich and Meredith, each with over forty years of experience in the film business, both adds a note of historical authenticity to the story and is at the same time ironic, given the lack of success and precarious existence of the characters they play.

The centrality of Tod's conflicted consciousness to the film's narrative themes is indicated by the 'painting' he creates in his lodgings at San Bernadino on an earthquake damaged wall. This grows out from a rose he places in a crack, a visual metaphor that, in the opening scene, establishes the film's central thematic conflict between romantic fantasy and reality, between the American Dream and American nightmare. The rose also signifies Tod's creative impulses and the flowering of his imagination as he takes in what he sees around him at the residential complex and strives to establish himself as an art director at Paramount studios in the late 1930s. Over the course of the story Tod attaches various sketches, paintings and photographs to the wall, creating a surreal, nightmarish montage of many of the characters he encounters, distorted and rendered grotesque by the elusive American Dream of success promised by the movies. Clearly paralleling his own psychological decline, by the final scene Tod's montage becomes starkly prophetic, merging with the scenes of violence and destruction he witnesses on Hollywood Boulevard, blurring fantasy with reality.

Images of water are also a prominent and recurrent metaphor, particularly the perpetual motion of sprinklers at the 'San Berdoo' and other locations in the film. These function to link the theme of artifice to the idealised image of Southern California as a region which promised both warm, sunny climes and the rapid acquisition of wealth. The film's languorous opening tracking shot of Faye sitting in the sun behind a 'screen' of water droplets, for example, clearly connotes the dream-like fantasies created by the

movies, but its fragility also plays upon the ‘El Dorado’ myth and the ‘artifice’ of Los Angeles. It points to the contradiction between the myth of abundance and the region’s limited natural resources, which were quickly outstripped by the rapid and unbridled growth of the city, and led to officials and businessmen devising complex and corrupt methods of bringing in water from hundreds of miles away.

The climactic riot on Hollywood Boulevard is the last in series of violent or threatening incidents that structure the film dynamically and develop its central themes, but also exemplify the paradoxical qualities of movies about the movies, and more specifically the competing pleasures and priorities of the new audience. That is, scenes such as the brutal cockfight at Homer’s house or the calamitous film shoot on the Paramount backlot, on the one hand underpin its critical-ironic stance towards the country’s traditional myths as propagated by the mass medium of cinema, and suggest the obverse of this illusory world is boredom, frustration and ultimately violence. On the other hand, these scenes of cinematic sensation simultaneously deliver the visceral thrills and spectacle that transcend intellectual concerns and re-mystify this self-referential movie.

Fig 1.3 Collapsing soundstage in the *The Day of the Locust*

The shooting of the Battle of Waterloo is a major set piece in the film which illustrates the paradoxical complexity of the its overarching themes. From the perspective of

history and the historical film, furthermore, it is a sequence of special interest, owing to the multiple 'presents' it self-reflexively enacts: the Napoleonic era, the 1930s, the Second World War, and the 1970s. The shoot takes place on a soundstage and represents Tod's first major job as an art director, and is based on his in-depth research into the historic battle and, significantly, his memories of an evening with Faye at Earle and Miguel's camp earlier in the story.

The camp sequence exemplifies 'spectators becoming participants', a recurrent ironic device in the book noted by Alaister Wisker which reinforces its central themes of fantasy and illusion.[55] It begins to build rhythmically with the camera intercutting in close-up between Miguel and Faye drunkenly exchanging sensual looks over the campfire, and the expressions of resentful jealousy of Earle and Tod. This resentment eventually turns to violence after the couple's public display of mutual lust progresses to a raunchy dance, and the 'audience' thus becomes involved in the action, as Earle clubs Miguel to the ground, a brutal act that appears to release Tod's pent up libidinal urges as he chases Faye down through the canyon and attempts to rape her. The camp scene is one of a series of interrelated events experienced by Tod that both fuel his creativity and contribute to his mental disintegration. A few days later, he returns to the deserted habitation, which in the cold light of day closely recalls the Dust Bowl conditions and migrant camps of the Great Depression, and angrily reflects on the night's events. His attention is then drawn to a leafless, isolated tree.

This symbol, an apparent metaphor for the spiritual wasteland of the Hollywood scene, along with Tod's memories of the night at the camp, are incorporated into his design for the Waterloo battle scene. Aptly, Faye and Earle, unbeknownst to Tod, have been employed as extras. The first section of the sequence, depicting the battle from the point

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[55] William Castle was a director, producer and occasional actor who started working in the film industry in the late 1930s, and who is best known for his 'b-movie' horror films. Castle produced *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), for Paramount.

of view of the film camera, briefly creates the illusion of reality, until the filmmaking apparatus and production personnel are revealed off camera. The director, played by a swaggering William Castle playing himself complete with his signature cigar, has called a halt to filming and is hectoring a member of the French infantry for the manner in which he is bayoneting an enemy soldier.[56] After repeated takes, he is raised up high upon a crane and bellows orders across the stage. Larger than life and with his authority seemingly absolute, the director's command of this battle sequence is an allusion to political dictatorship, and the rise of European fascism in the 1930s. This allusion draws a symbolic parallel, suggesting that, like Germany under Hitler, America was, and indeed still is, in thrall to the myths and illusions of Hollywood, a system that feeds upon and fosters frustration, and ultimately breeds violence. The scene then takes an ironic turn when shooting is resumed and the soldiers ascend the hill on one side of the soundstage. Work on the structure is incomplete and, doubling the artifice, it collapses, causing serious injuries to many of the cast. Amidst the chaos and confusion, Tod spots the warning signs that were not posted out, piled beneath the set. Yet, whilst the destruction of the 'film within a film' indicates that it is a flimsy construct, literally and figuratively, the graphic imagery and rapid cutting employed in this sequence is, paradoxically, a source of direct pleasure for the audience and thus performs a simultaneous process of re-mystification. Doubling the irony, the Hollywood myth is undermined and then re-instated. Doubling the irony, the Hollywood myth is undermined and then re-instated.

Spectacle in the film, however, is not confined to scenes of violence and destruction. A scene shot at the Ennis House, designed by the architect Frank Lloyd Wright and built in 1924, illustrates another key aesthetic current in the film, and the ambivalence of its meaning. A number of interior and exterior perspective shots emphasise the scale and beauty of this unusual temple-like structure, and home to Claude Estee high in the

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[56] Wisker, *The Writing of Nathanael,* p. 100.

Hollywood hills. On the one hand, this imagery coheres with the film's core themes, symbolising the power he holds as one of Hollywood's preeminent illusionists and his condescension to 'making mud pies for the great unwashed'. The executive's exploitative attitude, moreover, extends to the industry, and is demonstrated when he shows no compunction covering-up the studio's negligence on the soundstage. Yet the evocative images of the Ennis house, classically proportioned and bathed in the golden Californian sun, also evinces a pleasure in its surfaces, and thus, overlapping with the escapist or sentimental tendencies of the contemporaneous nostalgia wave, threatens to overwhelm or contradict these themes.

Fig 1.4 The Ennis House

Another important layer of mediation in Schlesinger's 1930s historical film, was is its intersection with a popular cycle of contemporary disaster movies released during the early to mid-1970s, which included *Earthquake* and *The Towering Inferno*, the first and third highest grossing films of 1974.[57] A CBS show about the phenomenon shown the following year featured an extract from the climactic riot sequence in *The Day of the Locust*. Both reflecting the extent to which the movie mainstream had assimilated the

[57] This is noted in a memo to Schlesinger; see 'A Proposal for the Publicity and Promotional Campaign for 'The Day of the Locust'', JRS/8/23, Schlesinger/BFI. A number of critics referred to the production as a disaster movie or used it as a frame of reference.

values of the 1960s counterculture, the fear of powerlessness or loss of control expressed by films in this cycle was also linked to the widespread disillusionment with established forms of authority and the country's institutions, arising from the ongoing controversies and crises of the period.[58] Thematically, West's Hollywood-set story about the corruption of the American Dream, resonates with these values and the cynical mood that had descended across the national landscape at the time. Visually, moreover, it contained large-scale scenes of spectacular destruction, a defining characteristic of disaster movies. Its relationship to other features of the cycle, however, is more complicated, and like the film's configuration of nostalgia, is source of generic ambivalence or ideological difference. In disaster films, the 'generative mechanisms' and analogue to contemporary traumas, such as Watergate, is 'a manmade systems failure or force of nature', writes Cook, 'often monstrously perverted, which threatens to destroy a group of characters brought together more or less by chance.....and while many of them die, a few prevail through their courage and resourcefulness.'[59] In *The Day of the Locust*, by contrast, the threat is abstract, insidious and self-destructing. It is the disjunction between fantasy and reality and its commercial exploitation by the American film industry, and compared to a tangible disaster such as an earthquake, for instance, is a far more complex. As such, human weakness, a dramatic device of conventional disasters films which is ultimately overcome, is pervasive and the outcome for society less certain. In *Jaws* (1975), by comparison, a mutation of the disaster cycle that smashed all previous box office records in the same year *The Day of the Locust* was released, the threat and resolution are clear. Glenn Mann writes:

> But if *Jaws* appealed to the fragile American psyche fraught with distrust and disillusionment, it also purged it with the catharsis of the shark's destruction. For *Jaws* ultimately promotes an ideology of reassurance through the conventions of

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[58] David A. Cook, '1974: Movies and Political Trauma', in Friedman (ed.), *American Cinema*, p. 116.

[59] Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 251.

> the disaster film genre, which "solves" contemporary problems by displacing them into simple, physical obstacles that ordinary citizens overcome, deflecting from the systemic problem on the larger social level.[60]

There is no such cartharsis in *The Day of the Locust*. The film reaches its cataclysmic denouement in the penultimate scene and major set piece, outside the famous Grauman's Chinese Theatre at the premiere of Cecil B. De Mille's war adventure *The Buccaneer* (1938). The riot is sparked by a murder committed by Homer; a stridently aggressive rendition of 'Jeepers Creepers' by Adore, a grotesque caricature of a child actor, causes the dejected accountant to snap and stamp his tormentor to death.[61] Tod spots Homer, bloody and beaten, being pulled through the crowd, but is unable to prevent his death. The baying mob turn on the actors and VIPs arriving at the premiere, and an animated radio commentator resembling Adolf Hitler, misinterprets the escalating violence for mounting excitement, and appears to whip them up into further frenzy. Shifting to Tod's point of view, the sequence becomes increasingly hallucinatory and apocalyptic as images of burning cars, pylons and palm trees, complete the 'San Berdoo' painting, which comes to life on the screen and then catches alight. Its creator lets out a scream. A newspaper headline reading 'Roosevelt Pledges Nation to Continue Fight for Tolerance' is consumed by flames.

The interplay between the film's Hollywood story and wider political events suggests the threat is part of a wider malaise, and not attributable to a single cause. It appears to challenge the very notion of cinema as a democratic art; a cultural form that 'belongs' to the people. An earlier scene of an evangelist preacher performing 'miracles' on debilitated members of the congregation extends the idea of false idols further, and broadens the cultural context of spiritual and moral degeneration. In this way, the film's

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[60] Mann, '1975', p. 154.

[61] The production team utilised a contemporaneous *Life* magazine article on child actors in Hollywood; 'Portrait of Hollywood', *Life*, 3 May 1937, pp. 28-35, JRS/8/10, Schlesinger/BFI.

thematic slant reflects the ideology of the Left (and a section of the new audience), which maintains that sophisticated solutions and far-reaching institutional reforms were required to tackle the complex problems confronting contemporary society. The ambiguous restoration of order in the film's final sequence supports this view, showing Tod's empty, vacated lodgings save for the rose in the wall, a fragile symbol of hope, but not sufficient to eliminate the film's underlying 'threat'.

Selling the 'illusion' and the divided response

Demonstrating continuity with its other recent releases, such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Chinatown* (both 1974), Paramount built an extensive campaign around *The Day of the Locust*, promoting it as a prestige historical production. Numerous interviews with John Schlesinger and on-set production articles appeared in specialist film publications and the national press discussing West's novel, the director's vision, and details of the shoot, in particular its major set pieces, which were designed to excite public interest in this unconventional historical epic.[62] Given its off-beat characters, complex themes and stylistic conceits, interest in the film would be particularly keen, it was anticipated, amongst educated urban cinema-goers. These elements, along with the visual spectacle in the film, would also draw the youth/countercultural segment that overlapped with the 'special audience', and help build the popular groundswell required to make the film a commercial success. The inevitable controversy generated by Schlesinger's adaptation of West's novel, moreover, was to be welcomed and considered a productive feature of the campaign.[63]

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[62] See, for example: Tom Buckley, 'The Day of the Locust: Hollywood, by West, by Hollywood', *The New York Times Magazine*, 2 June 1974, and Norma McLain Stoop, 'Preview with Pictures: "The Day of the Locust" Sets Within Set', *After Dark*, March 1975, JRS/8/28, BFI/Schlesinger.

[63] 'A Proposal for the Publicity and Promotional Campaign for The 'Day of the Locust'', JRS/8/23, Schlesinger/BFI.

Efforts to maximise the film's commercial appeal are reflected in composition of the trailer, which blends the key commercial attractions of 'nostalgia', spectacular action and images of unbridled lust, while remaining suggestive of its more iconoclastic elements. Its central focus is upon the love story or triangle between Tod, Homer and Faye, and the latter's ambition to make it in the movies. The classic Rodgers and Hart number 'Isn't it Romantic?' (1932), a highly ironic counterpoint in the film, evokes the period and supports the voiceover narrator's description of Hollywood as the 'most exciting, wonderful, glamourous place on earth'. Brief images of the picture's peripheral characters and extracts of violent action undercut this claim. Yet, benefitting from the 'built-in' contradiction of movies about movies, this content reinforces the film's attractions too. The promise of glamour is contained in a series of clips of Faye in stylish and elegant period outfits. Ironically, in one of these images, Faye, dressed in an expensive cream and silver sequined cocktail dress, is working in a high class brothel to pay her father's funeral expenses. The desperate and precarious circumstances of the actress, or the other characters in the film, are barely alluded to in the trailer, and, likewise, its central themes - the superficiality and emptiness of movie-made illusions - are only subtly intimated. Indeed, attuned to the paradoxical nature of the Hollywood movie about the movies, the trailer's claim that the picture is 'an unbelievable vision of love, success and dreams', is ambiguous and deceptive. It both implicitly references the film's themes, and, evocatively pitched to resonate with fans of nostalgia, affirms these timeless myths and escapist pleasures. In this way, it is the the kind of superlative statement typical of movie trailers designed to appeal mainstream tastes, and, in this case, particularly those cinema-goers who pay little or no attention to what the critics say. Critic Abbie Bernstein, for example, warned his readers: 'If you decide to see the film, know this before you enter: at first glance 'Locust' may seem to be about Hollywood in the '30s. It isn't. It's really a vision of hell.'[64]

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[64] Abbie Bernstein, 'The Reel Thing', *The Gardena Valley News*, 27 May 1975, JRS/8/28, Schlesinger/ BFI.

The ‘mutually love-or-hate public response' predicted by *Variety*’s prescient principal movie critic, Art Murphy, broadly characterised the reception of *The Day of the Locust* in the nation’s press.[65] Mixed reactions did figure too, but the polarity of critical opinion, especially amongst moderately conservative, mainstream and liberal commentators, was its salient feature. The inevitable comparisons between the adaptation and source novel, a revered modern classic, over issues of plot, theme, style and world view, and also the pertinence of the film’s historical themes to the concerns of the present, were two major areas of discussion. The latter was a focus mainly of liberal-intellectual and religious publications, and also a point of disagreement. With regards to the film’s style and generic influences, and their relationship to its central themes, critics were similarly divided; negative comments from mainstream commentators, who were perhaps less inclined or equipped to attempt to decode the thematic meaning of Schlesinger’s stylistic strategies, indicate that for this segment the film’s ‘look’ was a source of incoherence or confusion, and perhaps defied their expectations. The opinion of the conservative right, by comparison, appeared far less equivocal. That the film’s depiction of a violent, chaotic, and morally corrupt world of unsympathetic characters who lack agency and thus any real possibility of redemption, was at odds with the traditional myths and morality, and heroic individualism favoured by the country’s ‘silent majority’, was stated in no uncertain terms by Steve Dunleavy’s scathing review in the tabloid daily, the *National Star*. In it, Dunleavy describes the film as ‘just a nasty piece of artsy-craft liberal junk’, and ‘not my idea of decent American entertainment’.[66]

Bernstein’s review, by contrast, was in fact largely enthusiastic, and reflected the common view across many of the positive assessments of the film, which were made in

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[65] Art Murphy, ‘The Day of the Locust’, *Variety*, 18 April 1975, JRS/8/28, Schlesinger/BFI.

[66] Steve Dunleavy, ‘This I believe’, *National Star*, 7 June 1975, JRS/8/29, Schlesinger/BFI.

a variety of different publications: metropolitan, provincial, liberal and mainstream. The liberal intellectual critic, Hollis Alpert, writing in the *Saturday Review*, for example, praised it not as movie entertainment but as a bold and compelling, yet at times traumatic cinematic experience that was ultimately true to the spirit of the source novel.[67] As such, these critics predicted it would register as a hit with the 'art-house crowd', but struggle to attract cinema-goers from outside this niche, in large part owing to its lack of empathetic characters and bleak ending. Favourable reviews in the three major women's magazines, *Cosmopolitan*, *Women's Wear Daily* and *Glamour* go some way to countering this prediction, however, reflecting the assimilation of 1960s countercultural values into the cultural mainstream, and suggesting that the balancing of 'difficult' themes, human interest and visual spectacle was something of a success, at least with regards to women in their twenties and early thirties.[68]

Vincent Canby the chief critic at the liberal *The New York Times*, voiced perhaps the most persuasive assessment of Schlesinger's film, situating it in relation to 'genre' history of the Hollywood historical epic. To Canby, 'it is less a conventional film than a gargantuan panorama', evoking a kind of political/artistic nostalgia for the mural art produced by the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression, when these 'furiously politically committed artists would produce views of American life that seemed to eat away at the walls of the building meant to contain them.'[69] This reading highlights the left-leaning ideological bias in the film, which can only be intimated from West's novel, and would have appealed to a section of the *Times*' liberal/ metropolitan readership. Yet, the film was not without its flaws, such as the unnecessary pathos brought to the story by Faye Greener. For the *Times* critic, however, it was the film's

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[67] Hollis Alpert, 'Etched in Acid', *Saturday Review*, 17 May 1975, pp. 48-9.

[68] Howard Kissel, 'The Day of the Locust', *Women's Wear Daily,* 5 May 1975, p. 12, JRS/8/28, Schlesinger/BFI; Liz Smith, 'Hollywood Apocalypse', *Cosmopolitan*, July 1974, and Michael Korda, 'Movies', *Glamour*, July 1975, both JRS/8/29, Schlesinger/BFI.

[69] Vincent Canby, 'The Day of the Locust', *The New York Times*, 8 May 1975, p. 48.

sheer audacity that struck him as among its most noteworthy assets, writing 'has there ever before been a film of such manifest expense and physical scale, with so many extras an so much attention to set, costume and period (1938), to celebrate a vision of futility?'[70] Arguably not, but a film released six months later, Stanley Kubrick's slow, stately and fatalistic costume epic, *Barry Lyndon* (1975), shared a similarly pessimistic tone. Both Schlesinger and Kubrick enjoyed complete control of their respective projects, and Canby's comments highlight the unprecedented artistic freedom enjoyed by the modernist auteurs of the Hollywood new wave to revise or 'correct' traditional genres and explore their personal preoccupations. The critical sideswipe at the historical epic in *The Day of the Locust*, he notes, an established generic type hitherto largely neglected by the new wave, would have been a source of pleasure for some new audience types. Somewhat ironically, this was amplified by exploiting the extra-textual strategies particular to the promotion of historical epics, as evidenced by the extensive production features detailing the shooting of the film's major set pieces, a contradictory juxtaposition which dovetailed with the paradoxical qualities of its other genre classification: the Hollywood movie about the movies. Writing about Hollywood epics of the 1950s and 1960s, James Russell notes that promotional discourse detailing the scale and scope of the film's production is an effective marketing strategy which stresses 'the cultural importance of events', and 'the importance, seriousness and industrial clout of the film-makers.'[71] Textually, Vivian Sobchak argues, these discourses of magnitude and excess traditionally generate a particular 'history effect'; an existential temporal loop conferring significance on the past, as well as affirming the prosperous American consumer-capitalist society of the 1950s and early 1960s.[72]

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[70] Vincent Canby, 'A Marvelously Foolhardy 'Day of the Locust'', *The New York Times*, 11 May 1975, Section 2, p. 1.

[71] James Russell, *The Historical Epic and Contemporary Hollywood: From Dances with Wolves to Gladiator* (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 11.

[72] Vivian Sobchak, "Surge and Splendor": A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic', in Barry Keith Grant, (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 302-3. Sobchak writes: '[T]o use Hayden White's characterisation, the "content of the form" of the Hollywood genre is its mimetic and onomatopoetic modes of representation and rhetoric, together constituting a representational excess that yields a particular "history effect".'

Schlesinger's film, like *Barry Lyndon*, self-consciously refracts a historical period through its dominant cultural forms, and in contrast to their generic forbears, emphasises a sceptical view of contemporary western society.

But at the same time as the film's magnitude and excessiveness was a visceral or intellectual pleasure for some mainstream, liberal and countercultural cinema-goers, a roughly equivalent number of these niche types were put off by these qualities, especially those familiar with West's novel. A number of critics including John Simon for the centrist *Esquire*, and the influential Andrew Sarris writing in New York's 'alternative' weekly *The Village Voice*, argued Schlesinger's 'jackhammer' approach to the source novel, disregarded or failed to comprehend the intimate scale, cool irony and subtle wit of West's writing.[73] 'It is a calamitous idea to transfer a great or even very good novel to the screen', wrote Simon, or 'to make West's subtly ambivalent novel into the definitive disaster movie'.[74] Likewise, many critics accused the director of ideological 'overkill' and moral superiority, pointing out that the author had 'scrupulously' avoided politics and had treated his characters with 'infinite' compassion.[75]

A related area of critical disagreement was whether or not the film's content and themes were pertinent to the events and concerns of the present. In *New York* magazine Judith Crist opined that Schlesinger 'had turned West's metaphor into bristling contemporary comment', however, why this was she neglected to explain.[76] But the majority of critics who touched on this subject were of a contrary opinion. In the main these were liberal and countercultural observers, an ideological grouping for whom the contemporary

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[73] Andrew Sarris, Decline of the West in Adaptation, *Village Voice*, 12 May 1975, JRS/8/29, Schlesinger/BFI.

[74] John Simon, 'Nightmare of the Locust', *Esquire*, Aug 1975, JRS/8/29, Schlesinger/BFI.

[75] Frank Rich, 'How the West Was Lost', *New Times*, 30 May 1975, JRS/8/29, Schlesinger/BFI.

[76] Judith Crist, 'Dream into Nightmare', *New York*, May 12 1975, JRS/8/28, Schlesinger/BFI.

resonances of historical films tends to be an important focus, and whose tastes and values broadly reflect those of the new audience, the film's core demographic. Noting Schlensinger's 'big idea', the 'equation of Nazi decadence with show-biz vulgarity', Larry Peitzman of the alternative newspaper, the *Bay Guardian*, in a mixed review of the film, writes that 'he may even get by with it in the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam environment'.[77] Other critics were even less convinced. While West's novel was considered to be ahead of its time in its absurdist view of a culture yielding under the weight of its own contradictions, critics writing in liberal, countercultural and religious publications contended that the events of the intervening period - such as Hitler's Final Solution - had rendered 'Hollywood', as a metaphor of societal ills, inadequate.[78] David Ansen, the critic for the countercultural weekly, *The Real Paper*, for example, writes: 'Could it be that in the seventies light of day West's metaphors of American depravity are no longer convincing? Perhaps we've seen too many real horrors out in sunny California; perhaps after the Manson family the stakes have been raised in our literary conception of evil.'[79]

The film's 'look' also came in for criticism, and was a factor limiting its mainstream appeal, judging from the responses of two moderate to conservative middle brow dailies. For these reviewers the film's anti-nostalgic aesthetic - the ironic juxtaposition of the 'golden/sepia' fantasy life of the characters with the bitter and desperate reality of Hollywood's 'dream dump' - was either deemed excessive and incoherent, or interpreted in accordance with the pretense of the film's promotional strategy - as more or less unambiguously nostalgic.[80] Laura De Vincent, reviewing the film for *The New*

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[77] Larry Peitzman, TDOL, *Bay Guardian*, 14 June 1975, JRS/8/29, Schlesinger/BFI.

[78] Paul D. Zimmerman, 'Hooray for Hollywood', *Newsweek*, 12 May 1975, p. 52.

[79] David Ansen, 'Stay East, Young Man', *The Real Paper* (Boston), May 21 1975, JRS/8/29, Schlesinger/BFI. See also Reviewed by DFB-USCC, 'A Savage Look at Hollywood', *Tablet* (Brooklyn NY), 8 May 1975, JRS/8/29, Schlesinger/BFI.

[80] Donia Mills, *Washington Star*, 20 May 1975, JRS/8/29, Schlesinger/BFI.

Orleans States-Item, for example, complains of the film being 'Gatsbyised', referring to the consensus view of the Paramount production of F.Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel released the year before, which was that it failed to bring the Jazz Age (1920s) back to life, and instead more accurately embalmed it.[81] In other words, the film's aesthetic was interpreted not as a metaphor of illusion, but rather as a frivolous stylistic effect that stifles the potential for a compelling and realistic engagement with the film's late 1930s Hollywood milieu.

Conclusion

The Day of the Locust made under $3 million in rentals, highlighting that while American film and film culture had become increasingly self-consciousness in the 1970s, cinema-goers on the whole had not lost their appetite for Hollywood's timeless myths and fantasies. In fact, the huge success of *Star Wars* (1977) two years later, a film that by contrast fondly alludes to 'old' Hollywood and constructs a binary moral universe, suggested that this desire had actually increased. Schlesinger's film attempted to tap into nostalgia for classical period glamour, as evidenced by its deceptive marketing campaign, but its lack of sympathetic characters and downbeat ending put many people off. These latter elements and the film's implicitly anti-nostalgic aesthetic, furthermore, problematised the chief audience pleasure of the genre; the simultaneous process of de-mystification and re-mystification intrinsic to movies about the movies. The contradictory qualities of the violent set pieces that support the film's central theme as well as deliver visceral thrills, may have been compensatory in this respect. However, despite intersecting with the mainstream disaster movie cycle, the film's target market was primarily the new audience yet, as this analysis has demonstrated, responses were mixed amongst liberal, countercultural and metropolitan observers. On the one hand,

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[81] Laura De Vincent, *The New Orleans States-Item*, 7 June 1975, JRS/8/29, Schlesinger/BFI. See, for example, Vincent Canby, 'A Lavish 'Gatsby' Loses Book's Spirit', *The New York Times*, 28 March 1974.

the attempt to symbolically link the destructive symptoms of Hollywood's world of illusions to a wider malaise through its Depression-era setting, allusions to fascism and disaster film connotations, chimed with the broad ideological perspective of this demographic. Yet, on the other hand, a number of responses from this grouping asserted that its metaphors of violence were outdated and inadequate in the context of recent history. The film's fidelity to the tone and perspective of the source novel was similarly divisive, illustrating the inherent difficulties of adapting a classic novel to the screen, and perhaps the problems involved in making what was relevant at the time the book was written, pertinent to the cultural concerns of the mid-1970s.

Chapter 2: 'Endorsed by Everybody With the Exception of God': *Sounder* (1972), the Black Historical Film and 'Blaxploitation'

Although the shift from 'top down' to 'bottom up' historical film narratives during the 1960s was propelled by the forces of democratic change, most conspicuously Civil Rights, Hollywood still demonstrated its customary caution by largely avoiding the controversial and potentially divisive subject of race. Even as the film industry diversified at the end of the decade, broadening its aesthetic and ideological parameters in response to a deepening financial crisis, it was generally channelled into the Western, a long established barometer of contemporary concerns, but only available to those predisposed to deconstructing the genre.[1] However, despite the historical film's apparent circumvention of a social issue that came to define the era, the state of flux in Hollywood coupled with changing attitudes nonetheless resulted in the production of a small number of features in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that pertained more directly to contemporary race relations.

Sounder (1972) is a landmark historical film because it was one of the first to focus almost exclusively on the black historical experience. Directed by Martin Ritt, and adapted from the award winning children's novella written by William H. Armstrong, it charts an impoverished black sharecropping family's struggle for survival in the Depression South and the eldest son's quest to find his imprisoned father.[2] Widely

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[1] See *Little Big Man* (1970), *Soldier Blue* (1970) and *Ulzana's Raid* (1972). These films are more generally regarded as metaphors for America's ethnic conflict abroad, namely Vietnam, as opposed to domestic race issues.

[2] William H. Armstrong received the John Newbery Medal in 1970, which is awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children.

acclaimed in the national press, *Sounder* was also a solid box office hit, making $8.7 million in rentals, and went on to receive four Oscar nominations.[3]

Apart from its obvious merits as a sensitive, entertaining and well-crafted movie its critical reception and commercial success were also significantly influenced by the timing of its release, which coincided with the beginning of the controversial 'blaxploitation' boom of the early 1970s. This wave of violent action films featuring tough, triumphant black heroes proved extremely popular with America's young, black working class, and was in part a commercial derivation of the racial pride and autonomy espoused by 'Black Power', a broad-based cultural and political movement that eclipsed the Civil Rights movement in the second half of the 1960s. More broadly, 'blaxploitation' was one of the youth movie formulas - characterised by faster editing, gritty subject matter and graphic imagery - that Hollywood increasingly pursued from the late 1960s onwards in the wake of relaxed censorship regulations, and as demographic and lifestyle changes, and the impact of television in the previous two decades, conspired to dramatically reduce the over-25 movie audience.[4]

Sounder, by contrast, with its uplifting themes of family love and dignity in the face of adversity, went against the grain of black-themed movies being produced in the early 1970s, and attracted a middle class, cross racial, family audience, many of whom strongly disapproved of blaxploitation's violent themes and crude racial stereotyping. The film's moral standing was further enhanced by the endorsements it received from

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[3] The entire film cost around $900,000, see Carlton Jackson, *Picking Up the Tab: The Life and Movies of Martin Ritt* (Bowling Green, Kentucky: Bowling Green State University Press, 1994), p. 116. Rental figure taken from Lawrence Cohn, 'All-Time Film Rental Champs', *Variety*, 10 May 1993, section C, p. 102. The other three Oscar nominations were for Best Picture, Best Actor (Paul Winfield) and Best Screenplay based on material from another medium (Lonne Elder III).

[4] See chapter 11 in Paul Monaco, *The Sixties, 1960-69* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Monaco notes that although there was a shift towards a more visceral aesthetic style in American cinema in the late 1960s, commonly referred to as 'the cinema of sensation', this co-existed with, rather than replaced, Hollywood's traditional cinema of 'sentiment' and of 'spectacle'. It was in the harmony of these three features, moreover - most notably in the films of Steven Spielberg – that the American film industry discovered the formula that led to its commercial resurgence in the 'post-Jaws' blockbuster era.

prestige cultural figures and religious leaders, which were marshalled into the marketing campaign surrounding its release. Prominent Civil Rights activist and Baptist minister Jesse Jackson asserted that *Sounder* comes 'at a time when it is crucial for positive black imagery to be projected on the screen.'[5] The conjunction of these factors - the film's thematic concerns, public endorsements and core audience – strongly aligned *Sounder* with the non-violent ethos and integrationist aims of the early 1960s struggle for Civil Rights, and, as such, focalised the ongoing conflict in values over issues of race within the narrow and contested terrain of black filmic representation at the time.

Hollywood and the representation of African Americans

In order to understand the heated debate over the ethics of black movie entertainment at the time of *Sounder*'s release, it is important to chart the evolution of the representation of African Americans in Hollywood film, and how these representations were both shaped by and reinforced the values, attitudes, perceptions and popular myths of the period of their production. This historical overview will inform the analysis of the film's production, textual content, and marketing and reception in the sections that follow, and reveal in both opposing film types a tension between past representations that serve to maintain racial hierarchies, and progress towards a more fully articulated and authentic expression of African American identity.

The first five decades of American filmmaking perpetuated oppressive myths and stereotypes that reinforced an ideology of racial dominance predicated on a belief in blacks' moral and social inferiority, and reflected their subordinate status in a nation divided by a rigourously maintained colour line. Within the narrow bounds of race representation during this period, only a tiny minority of films managed to convey the

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[5] 'PUSH, ALA Laud 20th's 'Sounder'', *Variety* (daily), 29 September 1972, *Sounder* microfiche file, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Beverley Hills, California.

black socio-cultural experience with any degree of dignity or authenticity. Donald Bogle identifies five mythic characterisations introduced in the early silent period – the 'tom', the 'mammie', the 'coon', the 'mulatto', and the 'buck' - that became the dominant black stereotypes during this period, and remained a strong residual influence thereafter.[6]

The last type - the 'buck' - was first introduced in D.W Griffith's highly innovative, controversial and commercially successful racist historical epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The 'buck' posed a grave threat to a social and moral order that rested on a belief in white superiority, and was sustained by preserving the purity and separation of the white race. Bestial and violent in nature, his insatiable lust for white women - the ultimate symbol of racist patriarchal power - played on white stereotypes of black sexuality. However, following the ban imposed by the Hays Office's Production Code on all portrayals of miscegenation at the beginning of 1930s, the 'buck' and the tragic 'mulatto' became rarities in film, and, as Hollywood entered its classical period, the de-sexualised and non-threatening 'tom', 'mammie' and 'coon' became the prevalent types. The 'Stepin Fetchit' character played by the actor Lincoln Theodore Perry in a film career that spanned nearly half century and over fifty features is the most foremost example of the latter type. The role of the lazy, uncouth, eye-rolling 'coon' type was to provide comic relief, while at the same time, with their aversion to work and propensity for theft, affirm the stereotype of the unreliable and untrustworthy black. It was not until the 1970s that a contemporary version of the 'buck' made a dramatic return in Melvin

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[6] The first two types – the 'tom' and the 'mammie' – were the happy and loyal servants of benevolent white masters, and represented the social ideal for many viewers. The most famous Hollywood 'mammie', was played by the pre-eminent African American actress Hattie McDaniel, in her Oscar winning performance in *Gone With the Wind* (1939). McDaniel has been commended by many critics subsequently for the dignity and humanity she brought to the tightly constrained roles she played. 'Mulatto' characters were tragic figures with which the audience was sometimes encouraged to sympathise, but who were doomed because of their mixed racial inheritance. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American films* (New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 1-18. See also Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film 1900-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Van Peebles' surprise box-office hit and major precursor of 'blaxploitation', *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* (1971).

The mythic black characterisations featured in Griffith's film were a generic staple of a long series of popular historical melodramas set in the Old South, and were a component part of a potent Southern mythology that had its roots in nineteenth century literature. Popular films such as *Gone With the Wind* (1939) projected an idealised vision of the South into the national imaginary by celebrating the genteel manners and quaint charm of the white Southern aristocracy, and deploying a rich iconography of abundant landscapes, magnificent houses, and loyal and contented slaves. Beyond their commercial success, the greater significance of these Southern melodramas is how their mythic construction was both shaped by and molded attitudes towards the nation's contemporary economic, cultural and racial problems. Nostalgic representations of a stable old order and benign race relations affirmed the paternalism at the heart of America's racist white patriarchal ideology, and were a palliative to a white Northern population apprehensive about the migration of Southern blacks, by suggesting they would both assimilate easily and be accepting of their social subordination. Similarly, the Southern slave-owning class' prosperity, traditional family values, pastoral existence, and their embodiment of the old Native Spirit, offered a fleeting escape from the economic instability, social dislocation, fading traditions and perceived moral decline, symptomatic of America's relentless pursuit of progress and material gain in the modern era.[7]

America's involvement in the Second World War engendered widespread, if temporary, social change and sent a wave of liberalism through the nation. The avowed racism of the Nazis was a fractured mirror that made the theory of racial superiority at the core of

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[7] For a masterful analysis of the Southern film during this period see chapters 1-4 in Edward D. C. Campbell, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981).

American dominant ideology politically unacceptable. In Hollywood a confluence of interests resulted in an increase of positive black images, as The United States Office of War Information (OWI) sought to define the war and its aims, and promote national unity, and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and film industry liberals exploited anti-fascist sentiment to enhance the status of African Americans on the nation's movie screens.[8] Four war movies released midway through the conflict – *Bataan* (1943), *Crash Dive* (1943), *Sahara* (1943) and *Lifeboat* (1944) – made a momentous alteration to the 'lost patrol' genre by inserting a black character into the white group, with the intention, writes Thomas Cripps, of 'showing whites they had nothing to fear from change.'[9] Hollywood also began to move away from the crude caricatures that had predominated since the start of the century, and produce a number of films that began to address the issue of racism in America, albeit from a white point of view. *The Home of the Brave* (1949) and *Lost Boundaries* (1949) were the two films whose success initiated a wave of social problem films, which included *Pinky* (1949), *Intruder in the Dust* (1949) and *No Way Out* (1950).[10] Two later releases of note were *The Defiant Ones* (1958) and *The Imitation of Life* (1958).

Another symptom of the post-war shift in attitudes towards race was the inversion of the South from the nation's 'moral centre' to the North's 'moral other'. As such, Hollywood increasingly presented an often distorted and stereotyped post Civil-war South, describes Edward Campbell, 'populated by pitifully poor farmers, unrepentant bigots, sadistic rednecks, sex objects, and greedy, ambitious members of a corrupt upper class.'[11]

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[8] Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 26-28.

[9] Ibid., p. 72.

[10] Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 85. See also Chapter 8 in Cripps, *Making*.

[11] Campbell, *The Celluloid*, p. 143. Again, chapter 5 of Campbell's book provides a seminal analysis of the Southern film's re-interpretation from 1941 onwards.

In the 1960s, the conscience liberalism of films that drew on Southern caricatures to dramatise white injustice, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Hurry Sundown* (1967), and the Oscar winning *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), were a clear indication of the Civil Rights movement's influence on the national psyche, engendering an increased awareness amongst many Americans, especially in the North, of their country's legacy of racial inequality and oppression. The primary goals of the movement were to overturn Jim Crow laws, Southern segregation's legislative foundation, and end the unlawful bureaucratic practices deployed to disenfranchise the Southern black population. The geographical focus of the movement allied with the extensive media attention it attracted as its militant, non-violent protest strategy exposed white intransigence and brutality, helped to both legitimise the cause and focalise racism as a Southern problem when, in fact, it was intrinsically national. The difference in the North was that segregation had a de facto basis, because, despite the fact blacks were not prohibited from using public accommodations used by whites and enjoyed the right to vote, zoning regulations restricted them to run-down ghetto areas and racist employment practices meant invariably they worked in the worst, lowest paid occupations.[12] Hollywood film, however, artfully obscured this reality and helped the nation come to terms with the problem of race by recasting the South as the nation's estranged 'backward cousin' – the moral counterpoint to the progressive self-image of the liberal North.[13]

As will be shown in the following sections, while *Sounder* is noteworthy for avoiding the shrill representation of race relations that characterised the Southern film after 1945,

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[12] For a reliable social history of this period see chapters 4 and 5 in Richard Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States since 1938* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

[13] Sharon Monteith, *American Culture in the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 23.

at the same time, it inter-textually references the region's prior mythical incarnation as the romantic ideal.

The rise in conscience liberalism during the late 1950s and early 1960s also produced Hollywood's first African American superstar, Sidney Poitier. But as the Civil Rights movement reached a crescendo in the mid-1960s with historic legislation passed, the actor was becoming an increasingly contradictory figure. While on the one hand his stardom appeared to reflect significant progress toward greater racial equality, on the other, the roles he played embodied the implicit terms and limits of racial integration. As will be demonstrated, a similar tension is evident *Sounder*'s liberal aesthetic.

During the first half of the 1960s, the articulate, cultivated and impeccably dressed characters Poitier played appeared to defy old stereotypes, and their ability to retain their dignity under extreme provocation from ignorant, bigoted or uneducated white characters, chimed with the passive resistance strategies of the Civil Rights movement. In 1963 he cemented his position as a popular and talented actor, winning the Best Oscar for his performance in *Lillies in the Field* (1963). Yet, as his stardom peaked in the second half of the decade with the hit films *To Sir, With Love* (1967) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1968), his 'ebony saint' image came under attack from a number of black cultural commentators who dismissed it as an inverted stereotype, or 'a million dollar shoe shine boy', as prominent black nationalist and critic, Larry Neal, put it.[14] In other words, critics argued, Poitier was narrowly defined as a paragon of virtue; a new, sophisticated version of the old Uncle Tom type whose primary role was to patiently and loyally help the white man resolve his problems. At a time when the country's legacy of racial inequality weighed heavily on the national conscience, these carefully circumscribed roles served to assuage white liberal guilt, in a way that was

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[14] Quoted in Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 74. Sidney Poitier was the biggest box office star in 1968 according to Cobbet Steinberg, *Reel Facts*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 481.

firmly on the dominant group's terms. Moreover, Poitier's obvious attractiveness notwithstanding, his characters' abstention from adult sexual behavior was another clear continuity with past stereotypes.[15] These safe, unthreatening roles appeared out of step with the proliferation of subversive and ambiguous white anti-heroes in late sixties cinema. This indicated there was still a viable market for the kind of conservative Hollywood classicism Poitier's roles recalled, but equally, the continuing absence of mature and multi-dimensional characterizations in Hollywood film reflected white America's deep reservations about racial integration.[16]

By the early 1970s, with 'Black Power' at the height of its popular appeal, America's black population had become increasingly divided along class lines. During the first half of the 1960s the Civil Rights movement had broken through many of the deeply entrenched barriers to racial equality and re-shaped attitudes towards race, and less than a decade later, the effect of these changes were clearly evidenced in the steady growth of the black middle class. By 1976 a third of African Americans in employment held white-collar jobs, a twofold increase on the 1960 rate.[17] But upon the lives of the urban poor, who represented the majority, they had registered little impact. In the mid-1970s the unemployment rate among blacks stood at 13-14 percent, twice the rate among whites; among black teenagers it was a staggering 40 percent, or two and half times of that among white teenagers.[18] The social and economic disparities amongst the African American population were also mirrored by a difference in cultural attitudes, as many disaffected blacks questioned the terms upon which non-whites were able to prosper in the U.S., arguing that it came at the cost of forsaking the right to a distinct racial

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[15] Thomas R. Cripps, 'The Death of Rastus: Negroes in American Films Since 1945', in Richard A. Maynard (ed.), *The Black Man on Film: Racial Stereotyping* (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Co., 1974), p. 23.

[16] Monaco, *The Sixties*, pp. 149-151. For a critical survey of Sidney Poitier's films from this period see Edward Mapp, *Blacks in American Films: Today and Yesterday* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1972).

[17] Polenberg, *One Nation*, p. 276.

[18] Ibid., p. 275.

identity and culture. Faced with stark socio-economic realities and rejecting what they viewed as an inherently assimilationist model of racial integration, a radicalised minority of the country's predominantly young, inner city inhabitants rallied behind separatist organisations, such as the Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC), which had broken away from the mainstream Civil Right Movement in the mid-1960s, and the revolutionary Black Panther party. But more widespread was the engagement with fashion, literature, arts and popular culture as means of expressing racial pride and asserting dissatisfaction with the limited and degrading manner in which historically black characters and culture had been represented.[19]

The rise in black politics and consciousness towards the end of the 1960s coincided with a deepening recession in the film industry. Average weekly cinema attendances reached a high of 84 million in 1944, and then from 1946 began to decline, reaching an all-time low of 17 million in the early 1970s.[20] Partly in response to the shift in attitudes and growing pressure from Civil Rights activists, and partly in recognition of the commercial potential of a largely untapped inner city audience to alleviate the industry's grave financial problems, there was a threefold increase in black themed movies produced by Hollywood, from six to eighteen, between 1969 and 1971.[21] Quantitative change was also accompanied by a degree of qualitative improvement, insofar as African Americans were given more prominent roles – by the end of the 1960s black actors had shared equal billing with white actors in two of Hollywood's biggest grossing movies, *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) and *In the Heat of the Night* (1968). There was also a greater emphasis on the black social experience than had previously been the case; the two most noteworthy films in this respect were *The Learning Tree* (1969), African American director Gordon Parks' poignant semi-autobiographical 'coming of

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[19] Ibid., pp. 231-234; Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), pp. 62-64.

[20] Jim Hillier, *The New Hollywood* (London: Studio Vista, 1992), p. 13.

[21] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 82.

age' story set in 1920s Kansas, and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) which prefigured some of the key generic and aesthetic conventions of blaxploitation.[22] Still a long way short of the range and complexity of representations available to the white audience, and often constrained by cheap, generic formulas and stereotypes the film industry deployed in an attempt to capitalise on niche markets, this period nonetheless constituted the most radical shift in Hollywood's representation of race.

Despite the increased black presence on the nation's movie screens at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, however, in relative terms the country's sizable black audience was still under-represented on the movie screen. *Variety* estimated ticket sales to African Americans accounted for up to one third of the national total, but they made up only 10-15 per cent of the population.[23] The disproportionate presence of African Americans in large, urban cinemas was a direct result of the migration of millions of blacks to northern industrial cities, mainly from the late 1930s onwards, and the concurrent 'white flight' out of these cities into racially restricted suburban communities, which accelerated following the phasing out of school segregation that commenced in 1955, and the widespread race riots in the nation's inner cities during the second half of the 1960s. By far the largest proportion of the black, urban audience was, moreover, under-25 and working class, and because Hollywood films on the whole did not sufficiently reflect either the socio-economic reality or the cultural experience of this audience segment, the full commercial possibilities of this potentially lucrative market remained unrealised.

This situation changed dramatically in the wake of the surprise box-office success of Melvin Van Peebles' low budget crime thriller *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* (1971). The adventures of Sweet Sweetback, the film's tough, oversexed, street hustling

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[22] Cook, *Lost Illusions*, pp. 259-260.

[23] Figures cited in Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 83.

hero, as he struggles against an oppressive white system, became the prototype for the revised generic model Hollywood would deploy to fully exploit the consumer potential of the black audience, and thus ease its deepening financial crisis. *Sweet Sweetback* cost $500,000 to make and went on to make $4.1 million in rentals, a healthy return for an X-rated picture.[24] *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972), two of the most popular black action genre releases, generated $7.1 million and $6.4 million respectively.[25] By 1975, the year of blaxploitation's demise, over 200 titles had been released.[26]

Hollywood's 'blaxploitation' films were essentially re-workings of white action genres, mostly the gangster film and crime thriller. Chief among the attractions for the core, under-25 audience for white action films was their strong emphasis on sex and violence, and young black film-goers were no different in this regard. But what turned these commercially reliable genres into a black cultural phenomenon were a number of significant revisions to the formula: first and foremost, the heroes are black instead of white; second, the protagonist's gritty, urban milieu is intrinsic to the themes, plot and action; third, the characters' distinct style and vernacular, and the films' musical soundtrack foreground contemporary black cultural identity; lastly, old racist stereotypes are reversed and the antagonists, over which the films' heroes predictably triumphs, are portrayed as caricatured representatives of corrupt white power structures.[27]

Blaxploitation's reception in the early 1970s provoked a heated debate amongst political, civic and religious groups, intellectuals, media commentators, industry figures, and film artists, and, as Ed Guerrero observes, 'brought to the surface of African

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[24] Cohn, 'All-Time Rental', p. 98.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Will Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 98.

[27] See Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (London: Routledge, 2008).

American discourse the subtle fissures and cracks of class tension, ideological conflict, and aesthetic arguments that had been simmering since the winding down of the civil rights movement.'[28] Opponents of the films, which included many prestigious cultural and religious figures, argued that morally irresponsible, white-dominated Hollywood film studios were exploiting young black audiences by supplying them with a damaging diet of sex, violence and drug-taking, and were updating old stereotypes – the sexually available black female and the 'buck' as male hero. The growing opposition to the genre amongst black civic groups intensified significantly in the summer of 1972 following the release of the box office smash *Super Fly*; critics maintained the film glorified its criminal protagonist, the drug kingpin, Priest (Ron O'Neal). Soon after its release the Coalition against Blaxploitation (CAB) was formed, made up of several civil rights and community groups, including the NAACP, CORE and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).[29] In a strongly worded statement its founder, Junius Griffin, called for direct action: 'The transformation from the stereotyped Stepin Fetchit to Super Nigger on the screen is just another form of cultural genocide. The black community should deal with this problem by whatever means necessary.'[30] Likewise, Reverend Jesse Jackson, speaking on behalf of his newly formed organization, People United to Save Humanity (PUSH) threatened to organize pickets and boycotts of cinemas if Hollywood studios failed to exercise greater corporate responsibility.[31]

Commentators who offered a more positive account argued the moral stance taken by some critics vis-à-vis 'blaxploitation' was patronizing, hypocritical and lacking realism.

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[28] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 87.

[29] Ibid., p. 100.

[30] 'Blacks vs. Shaft', *Newsweek*, 28 August 1972, p. 88.

[31] Guerro, *Framing Blackness*, p. 100. On the other side of the ideological divide Black Panther party leader Huey P. Newton differentiated between the minority of black action films, including *Sweet Sweetback*, in which the revolutionary ends – i.e 'victory' over an oppressive white system - justify the hero's transgressive means. And the rest which are 'dangerously counter-revolutionary' because '[T]hey leave revolution out or, of it's in, they make it look stupid and naïve.' See Guerro, *Framing Blackness*, p. 87 and Charles Michener, 'Black Movies', *Newsweek*, 23 October 1972, p. 77.

'It's ridiculous,' maintained Gordon Parks, the director of *The Learning Tree* and *Shaft*, 'to imply that blacks don't know the difference between truth and fantasy and therefore will be influenced in an unhealthy way'.[32] Similarly, actor Ron O'Neal alluded to the class and concomitant ideological conflict informing the opposing positions on black genre film-making, when he complained he was 'tired of hankerchief-head Negroes moralizing on the poor black man.'[33] Black action films, like the white action genres from which they derive, these commentators maintained, were popular primarily because they served a therapeutic function by sublimating the desires and frustrations of the audience, but unlike their generic pre-cursors they were being judged according to more exacting standards. As the actor James Earl Jones: 'If they're going to put the damper on John Shaft let them put it on John Wayne too and they'll find out there are a lot of people who need those fantasies.'[34]

Indeed, the popularity of films such as *Shaft* with black cinemagoers was such that Poitier attempted to distance himself, with mixed results, from the accommodationist roles that had made him famous. But in spite of this shift and, to a large extent, because of it, the success of *Sounder* re-affirmed there was still a sizeable market for a film concerned with depicting what one critic described as 'the superior virtue of the oppressed.'[35]

Between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s, Hollywood produced a number of historical films with black themes or stories, but these were overwhelmingly outnumbered by the quantity of 'black' films set in the contemporary period. As black genre films were invariably made on limited budgets the comparatively high production costs involved in

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[32] Michener, 'Black Movies', p. 77.

[33] 'Blacks vs. Shaft', p. 88.

[34] Michener, 'Black Movies', p. 77.

[35] Jon Landau, 'Films', *Rolling Stone*, 18 January 1972, p. 58.

period recreations were a probable factor, but more significant was the widely held perception amongst African Americans of the past as a site of indignity and suffering. It is unsurprising, then, that many of these historical films were in the 'blaxploitation' mould, and sought to overturn this perception by indulging in some b-movie historical revisionism to exact revenge on white racist America. A handful, however, had some basis in fact, such as the most successful of the 'black westerns', *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), starring Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte as two tough and savvy westerners who guide groups of liberated slaves and protect them from ex-confederate nightriders as they migrate west after the Civil War. Another key historical film from this period which belonged to the so-called 'slavesploitation' sub-genre was *Mandingo* (1975), an unsparing and unsentimental portrait of a decadent and decaying Louisiana slave plantation in 1840 that completely inverts Classical Hollywood's representation of a stable and benevolent Southern slave society. The stated intention of director Richard Fleischer was to dramatize some harsh truths about America's race history. Commercial success was presumably of equal importance. Historical accuracy notwithstanding, the taboo-breaking inter-racial sex scene between the slave Mandingo and his master's wife proved a marketable commodity that was extremely effective in exciting the public's curiosity. Despite being near universally denounced by the critics for distorting and sensationalizing history, the film made $8.6 million in rentals.[36] Respected film critics Andrew Britton and Robin Wood subsequently mounted a persuasive defence of Fleischer's film, arguing that it was a realistic and compelling portrait of the slavery business in the Deep South around the middle of the nineteenth century. Wood went as far as describing it as 'the greatest film about race ever made in Hollywood.'[37]

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[36] Cohn, 'All-Time'.

[37] See Robin Wood, *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 265. Also see Andrew Britton, 'Mandingo', *Movie*, no. 22, (February 1976).

Towards the other end of the moral and emotional spectrum was the other high-grossing black crossover film of the early 1970s alongside *Sounder*, the Billie Holliday biopic *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972). Produced by Motown the film made rentals of $11 million and garnered the film's star, the soul singer Diana Ross, the Best Actress Oscar, beating Cicely Tyson who was nominated in the same category. The commercial success of both films, which featured black stories that were palatable to white audiences, were one of the factors that contributed to blaxploitation's demise, as Hollywood discovered a more profitable formula that appealed to a broader, cross-racial audience.[38]

Universalising the black historical experience

First published in 1969, William H. Armstrong's children's novella *Sounder* was adapted to film by the black screenwriter Lonne Elder III, in collaboration with the director Martin Ritt and the independent producer Robert Radnitz, both of whom are white. Armstrong, who is also white, based the book on a story he was told as child by an old African American man employed by his father, a provenance the author stresses in the Author's Note: 'It is the black man's story, not mine. It was not from Aesop, the Old Testament, or Homer. It was history - *his* history.'[39]

Indeed, the history *Sounder* recounts is of black rural hardship and racial oppression in the Deep South, and the assertion it is '*his* history' is reinforced by the fact that, although written in the third person, it is told from the perspective of an African American boy, the eldest child of a family of impoverished sharecroppers. Yet because the characters remain un-named and their geographical locale un-disclosed, Armstrong's

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[38] Monaco, *American Film Now: The People, The Power, The Money, The Movies*, 2nd edition (New York: Zoetrope, 1984), p. 193. The other key factor revealed in survey data was that around 35% of the audience for such 'non-black' blockbusters such as *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973), were African American. Commercial logic dictated, therefore, that Hollywood no longer had to focus on producing sub-culturally specific genre films to attract the young, black audience.

[39] William H. Armstrong, *Sounder* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. x.

evocative tale of the dignity and fortitude of the black family is imbued with the timeless quality of myth. In the film the focus on the boy's experience is retained, as is the novella's basic narrative structure, which charts the arrest and incarceration of the boy's father for stealing some food from a white man's house, the endurance of the family harvesting the crop in his absence, and the boy's failed quest to locate his undisclosed labour camp. There are aspects of the film, both in terms of narrative and theme as well as overall mood and atmosphere, that depart significantly from the source novel, however, and in this section will be considered within a broader discussion of the aims, approaches and preoccupations of the film's director, producer and screenwriter, and the commercial imperatives of Hollywood.

A key motivation behind Martin Ritt's involvement in the *Sounder* project was that he believed the film could provide a window on the past that had direct relevance to the present, by helping to contextualise the post-Civil Rights 'explosion' in black consciousness. 'For every explosion, there has to be a past,' he stated, 'I wanted to make a film that made it clear why that explosion happened.'[40] *Sounder*, Ritt attested, was an accurate representation of the 1930s when organized resistance or protest were not an option for black people, but beneath the exterior of passive compliance there was a growing awareness of the philosophical writings of black thinkers such as W. E. B. Dubois:

> It was the time of the beginning of consciousness in blacks which led in many ways to the militancy of the present time. Many of the black intellectuals spent their youthful years in the same way as our youthful hero. I went to college in the South at that time, and remembered very well the correct and careful behaviour of

[40] Martin Ritt to Klaus Freund (letter), 4 January 1973, 30.f-317, Martin Ritt papers, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California.

the blacks that covered the volcano that was about to explode.[41]

In the film, extracts from Dubois' seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) are read by a black schoolteacher and references are made to the abolitionists Harriet Tubman and Crispus Attucks.[42]

Prior to *Sounder* Ritt had worked on a number of projects that confronted the problem of race. It was a prominent theme in his first film, *Edge of the City* (1957), co-starring Sidney Poitier, and *Paris Blues* (1961), and it becomes the central focus in *The Great White Hope* (1970). *Sounder* would be his fourth, reflecting an intensity of concern shared by few other white directors.[43] He stated that he made movies about blacks because 'I have to….I feel deeply about the dilemma of Black people. I always have.'[44] Ritt's passion for tackling serious subjects was shaped by his experiences as an actor and playwright during the Depression. First working for the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) and then as member of the Group Theatre (1937-40), he thrived in a fertile creative climate where art merged with activism and naturalism became synonymous with truth, forging a reputation for himself as a talented and socially committed dramatist and performer. However, in the paranoid Cold War climate of the late 1940s and 1950s, Ritt, like many of his contemporaries who had worked in progressive or leftwing theatre groups during the 1930s, found himself a target of an anti-communist witch-hunt. Although he was never called to testify before the House Un-American Activities investigative committee, his name appeared on a number of published lists and in 1952, two years after embarking on a highly successful career in television, he

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[41] Ibid.

[42] This is an alteration; in the source novella the 'boy' is introduced to the French philosopher Montaigne by a male teacher.

[43] Gabriel Miller, in Peter Brunette (ed.), *Martin Ritt: Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), p. x.

[44] Ibid.

was effectively blacklisted from the industry.[45] Ritt returned to the theatre, before launching his career as a film director with *Edge of the City* in 1957, his first production to deal with racism, co-starring a young Sidney Poitier.[46]

Sounder was made in partnership with the Mattel Toy Company, and its release marked Robert B. Radnitz's twelfth year as an independent producer, over which time he had established himself, in the words of one journalist, as 'the only successful American maker of children's films outside the gates of Walt Disney Studios.'[47] Out of the seven features he produced during this period – *Dog of Flanders* (1960), *Misty* (1961), *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1964), *And Now Miguel* (1966), *My Side of the Mountain* (1969), *The Little Ark* (1972) and *Sounder* - he was able to boast that 'all but one…made money', and that between them they had collected over 300 awards.[48] The majority of these honours were bestowed upon his work by institutions and organizations concerned with highlighting the potential for film to educate and morally enrich its audience.[49] But his productions also attracted the attention of critics concerned with enhancing cinema's artistic credentials. In the opinion of some commentators, the emphasis on character over plot and the unifying theme of gain measured against loss and loneliness, along with their contemplative, semi-documentary camera style, was evidence of Radnitz's distinct authorial voice.[50] Though his pictures 'begin dull', he states; '[T]hey creep. I'm

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[45] Ibid., p. xiii.

[46] Bruce Cook, 'Norma Rae's Big Daddy' (1980), in Miller (ed.), *Martin Ritt*, p. 57. The television blacklist was not as 'official' as the HUAC maintained movie blacklist, which presumably worked in Ritt's favour when David Susskind, the independent, New York based producer of *Edge of the City* employed him as director, despite the Hollywood blacklist still being widely enforced.

[47] Frances Taylor, 'Sounder', *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), Section 2, p. 12, 1 October 1972; Aljean Harmetz, 'Robert Radnitz-Unlikely Avis to Disney's Hertz', *Los Angeles Times*, 18 March 1973. Clipping in 'Sounder - L.A. Times Calendar Article and Letters March 1973', Robert Radnitz Collection, The Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

[48] Harmetz, 'Robert Radnitz'.

[49] Amongst the awards *Sounder* received were *Scholastic Magazine*'s 'Bell Ringer' award, the '1973 Award of Merit' from the Catholic Press Council, and the '1972 Interreligious Film Award' from the National council of churches, the Synagogue council of America and the U.S. Catholic conference.

[50] Harmetz, 'Robert Radnitz'.

trying to heap detail on detail so you get a smell, a taste, a feel of how those people really live – the kind of food they eat, the way they dress.'[51] Healthy box office returns notwithstanding, his approach often provoked an adverse reaction in an industry where the commercially proven formula emphasized plot and action. They kept 'telling me the films were too much like documentaries' and 'weren't entertainment.' 'I guess they were right since, to them, the word 'entertainment' meant an escape from the world around them. But people are often interested in the world around them. Why else has Peterson's 'Field Guide to Birds' been a best seller for the last 10 years?'[52]

William H. Armstrong's poignant story of a boy's search for his father set in rural Louisiana during the 1930s was ideally suited to Radnitz' naturalistic approach and thematic concerns. But undermining claims to sole authorship are the contribution of key collaborators, and in the humanistic, semi-documentary style of Martin Ritt, Radnitz collaborated with a director whose attitude and approach to filmmaking was in harmony with his own.[53] He also shared a similar conviction over the story's pertinence to the present. Yet, as his comments in the film's press release indicate, this was because he believed the problem of race is ultimately superseded by the story's universal themes:

> I have wanted for some time to do a film with a black theme, but one without special pleading. I've wearied of the exploitative films of this nature. I've wanted to find a simple story about people who were black, but in larger and more important sense were identifiable as Everyman. *Sounder*, I feel, is such a story, and for me the film is an important one at this time in our history.[54]

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ritt employed an African American, Charles Washburn, as assistant director.

[54] *Sounder* Twentieth Century Fox Press Release, *Sounder* microfiche file, British Film Institute Library, London.

Radnitz's refers here to the tendency in post-war social problem films to present, as critic Paul Warshow states, 'the modern white liberal or radical view which sees blacks as *only* a social problem or sees them as people *only* negatively: as maimed, deprived, suffering, destroyed.'[55] More directly, however, he is addressing an audience segment, predominantly middle class and over-25, outraged or alienated by blaxploitation. In *Sounder*, by contrast, he makes clear in a clumsily ambiguous manner, the film's universal themes override, or are 'more important' than, the story's socio-cultural specificity. Of course, stressing universal themes is standard practice in the promotion of Hollywood films and helps to attract the broadest possible audience. But Radnitz's statement suggests the film's de-emphasis of race was more than simply a commercial consideration and was intended to ameliorate contemporary racial antagonisms, thus elevating it above a mere family entertainment to a film of significant social utility. Indeed, in a letter to *Newsweek* magazine Radnitz declared that *Sounder*, a film of 'black dignity...has crossed the color line. It has, in effect, de-segregated the market for black films.'[56] As his rhetorical strategy indicates, however, the film's positive virtues were also freighted with ideological meaning and recalled the ethos and aims of the Civil Rights movement.

The African American screenwriter, Lonne Elder III, came to the attention of Ritt and Radnitz through *Ceremonies for Dark Old Men*, a hit play he had written which ran in New York in 1968. *Melinda* (1972), one of the better-quality, more authentic black crime genre films produced in the early 1970s, was the only other feature Elder had worked on before he took on the job of adapting Armstrong's novella. After reading the book, Elder recognised '[I]t had a kind of atmosphere about it conducive for making a

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[55] Paul Warshow, 'Sounder', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2 (Spring 1973), p. 61. Refer to the previous section for examples of Social Problem films.

[56] Robert Radnitz to *Newsweek* (letter), 17 October 1972, 'Sounder - Press thank you notes New York', Radnitz/USC.

picture,' but decided 'there were a number of elements [he] didn't like.'[57] The fundamental change Elder made to the novella in his screenplay was to shift the story away from the 'absurd and impractical' focus on the coon hound, Sounder, to the trajectory family's 'basic drive and function.. toward self-survival.'[58] The dog is retained, however, and is a narrative device used to foreshadow and parallel the experiences of the father; after being maimed by the Sheriff, he abruptly disappears, and eventually returns after having recovered from his injuries. Thus, another significant change from the book is the film's ending. Instead of Nathan Lee dying from the injuries he suffered during his incarceration, which Elder asserts 'would have become a downer', he survives, and in a moving scene tenderly urges his devoted son to seize the opportunity to leave the family homestead and get an education.[59] His display of manly vigour during the baseball game earlier in the film, directly before his arrest for stealing a ham to feed his hungry family, is inserted to underscore his subsequent emasculation and physical decline.

The changes Elder made contributed to a story that is less sombre and more hopeful than the source novel, greatly enhancing the film's commercial appeal. As did the decision to significantly play down the unnamed boy's experience or perceptions of racial injustice described by Armstrong.[60] Elder was keen to avoid turning *Sounder* into the 'stereotype' – 'the story of them struggling against the odds of racism.'[61] In contrast

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[57] Rochelle Reed, 'Lonne Elder III Seminar', *American Film Institute: Dialogue on Film*, vol. 2, no. 7 (May 1973), p. 2.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid., p. 4.

[60] In Armstrong's novella the family members are un-named and referred to as 'boy', 'father', 'mother' and so on. For a comprehensive analysis of the source novel's adaptation see Barbara Tepa Lupack, *Literary Adaptations in Black American Cinema: From Oscar Michieux to Toni Morrison* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002), pp. 328-337.

[61] Reed, 'Lonne Elder', p. 8.

to the 'message' orientation of social problem films, *Sounder*'s focus on the plight of a black sharecropping family in the segregated South was unusual.[62]

Elder's over-arching aim in adapting the novella was not to diminish the realities of racial injustice in the South, but instead to 'consolidate a national culture.'[63] The writer grew up in a ghetto in New Jersey and Harlem, but had every confidence his screenplay was an authentic historical representation of the lives of a poor sharecropping family in Depression-era Louisiana, because there was 'no great schism in terms psychologically, socially…. between being a city black and a country black.'[64] When millions of poor rural blacks migrated to nation's urban-industrial centres in the post-war period, he argues, their historical experiences travelled with them and became an intrinsic part of a universal black cultural consciousness from which he drew inspiration. Yet he acknowledges that for many African Americans, including those who rejected *Sounder*, the rural South is a site of historical trauma: 'What I am saying is we are not *that* removed from what we were then. There are a lot of black people who like to try and run away from it and that's why they run, because the identification is so assaulting and awesome'.[65]

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[62] Ibid., p. 8. An addition made to the film Elder opposed follows Nathan Lee's arrest when he kicks away the assistant sheriff's shotgun as he shoots at the family dog, Sounder: 'That would have been motivation to just kill him on the spot. If you create a situation, especially when you are dealing with the South, you have to be very careful how you are going to live with it in terms of what happens in that scene so it doesn't take the scene somewhere else or make it into something else. Which they avoided. Now I don't know why they did that. I figure this addition to the scene was made to display some kind of heroism on the part of the father. But to me it was craziness.'

[63] Ibid., p. 10.

[64] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

[65] Ibid., p. 9.

Realism and myth

As indicated in the first section of this chapter, *Sounder* is a historical film that both refers to reactionary myths, and broadens the bounds of race representation. Similarly, the second section demonstrated how the adaptation of William H. Armstrong's novella was shaped by the preoccupations of the director, producer and screenwriter, as well as how the story's socio-historical specificity was reconciled with, or indeed, subordinated to the commercial demands of Hollywood filmmaking. Building on this analysis, with its emphasis on broader contextual factors, this section will further illuminate the film's inherent tensions and contradictions through an examination of its narrative, thematic and visual content. Thus the discussion of the film's intertextuality and ideological continuity with past representations in Hollywood filmmaking will be extended, and furthermore expanded to include an examination of its aesthetic properties vis-a-vis 1930s documentary art. But first the focus will be upon the extent to which *Sounder's* representational strategies, characterisations and historical perspective positively re-shape perceptions of race and advance the understanding of the African American experience.

Sounder was filmed over nine weeks in the East Feliciana and St. Helena parishes of Louisiana in America's Deep South, because Robert Radnitz believed 'the actual site will give the film mood and authenticity.'[66] This proved to be an astute decision with cinematographer John Alonzo's slow paced, intensely naturalistic camera work evoking a strong sense of period and place, at the same time as advancing the film's broader humanistic themes, a visual strategy afforded considerable scope in the absence of substantial dialogue or a detailed plot. *Sounder*'s authentic rural ambience is further enhanced by Taj Mahal's simple diegetic and non-diegetic blues score.

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[66] 'Twentieth Century Fox Production Information Guide: Sounder', (1972), p. 4 [*Sounder* microfiche/ BFI].

The film's pictorial style is particularly successful in establishing each family member's bond with one another and their unity with the surrounding countryside, which is lent a revelatory air through the use of long shots and long takes. In this way, the abundant beauty of the landscape, and the steady cadences and subtle textures of rural life act as a visual counterpoint to the Morgans' impoverished existence, and as such manifest a kind of spiritual sustenance for the characters and viewer alike. The family's circumstances worsen considerably, however, following Nathan Lee's incarceration, and the equilibrium or wholeness we witness at the beginning of the film is disrupted, impelling David Lee to embark on a quest to find his beloved father.

The intimate bond between Nathan Lee and his eldest son is established in the first scene during their evening hunt for game. Clearly having paid respectful attention to his father's guiding philosophical principles in the past, the young David Lee ameliorates their failure to catch any possum when he states – 'You miss some of the time what you do go after, but you miss all of the time what you don't go after', to which Nathan Lee remarks: 'Who said I didn't put my mark on you, boy?' Later, in the town jail, David Lee puts on a brave face while witnessing his proud and determined father's degrading circumstances, but is unable to contain his distress when he fears he will never see him again once he has been moved to a prison labour camp. As they part company they firmly clasp each other's arms, a gesture that indicates neither their bond nor their spirits shall be broken, and that empowers the boy to take on the responsibilities of his father in his absence. Likewise, the warm and loving relationship between Nathan Lee and his wife Rebecca is equally affecting; when she runs headlong down the hill from the family homestead to embrace him when he finally returns, a sequence of cross-cuts

gives the impression of her running a great distance, underscoring the intensity of her feelings of joyous relief.[67]

As Bogle states, images of a close and loving black family such as these were at the time a rarity, and a welcome contrast to the much more common representation in Hollywood film of the African American family disintegrating under the weight of socio-economic pressures, such as in *Anna Lucasta* (1959) and *Raisin in the Sun* (1961).[68]

There was criticism from some quarters, however, not of the Morgan family's fundamental stability and togetherness, but because a number of reviewers could not reconcile the family's wellspring of cheerful optimism or lack of indignation with the formidable obstacles they confront.[69] Yet, as the range of different responses to the film indicate, contemporary ideological currents were as influential in shaping the perception of historical 'truth' as empirical facts, and in this instance reflected the dominant sensibilities of black culture and politics in the 1970s. Indeed, the Civil Rights anthem 'We Shall Overcome', which embodies the movement's principled forbearance and is reflected in the underlying ethos of *Sounder*, had in the preceding half decade become overshadowed by 'Black Power', a slogan that was a call for greater autonomy and validated unfettered emotional responses to racial injustice amongst large sections of the African American population. Of course, during the 1930s, such stridency or openness would have surely resulted in violent retribution for Southern blacks and would have been wholly inappropriate in *Sounder*. But at least if the private frustrations or inner conflicts of the characters had been more fully articulated, or had they committed some

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[67] This scene was based on the finale of the King Vidor silent *The Big Parade*. See Steve Vineberg, 'A Child Actor Grows Up to Retell a Tale of Poverty and Hope', *The New York Times*, 19 January 2003, *Sounder* clippings file, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverley Hills, California.

[68] Bogle, *Toms, Coons*, p. 249.

[69] See next section.

minor acts of everyday resistance, the film would have had the potential to be a more complex, compelling and, in ideological terms, even-handed representation of the black historical experience. A greater emotional depth or ambivalence, furthermore, would have helped it avoid negative connotations with classical Hollywood's 'gentle' film Negroes whose amiable placidity belied the oppressive social conditions they endured.[70] Moreover, in light of Martin Ritt's stated intention to contextualise the rise of Black Power, this type of representation may also have illuminated some of the inherent dilemmas and contradictions that had shaped and directed the ideological course of black politics and consciousness during the 1960s and into the 1970s. On the other hand, although a greater degree of moral uncertainty or emotional complexity could have made *Sounder* a far more satisfyingly sophisticated and compelling historical film, in commercial terms this undoubtedly would have problematised its marketability as a blaxploitation 'counter-text' (see next section).

However, further to the positive appraisal of *Sounder*'s representation of the African American experience, its characters do display a number of qualities that clearly distinguish them from the limited character types Hollywood had historically deployed. Rebecca's will and determination to bring in the crop in the absence of her husband, for instance, on the one hand brings to mind a recurrent representation of African American womanhood in American popular culture, the strong black matriarch.[71] Yet, on the other, she does not resemble the familiarly overweight, unfeminine, loud and emasculating stereotype, either in behaviour or appearance. That she is in a close and loving relationship distances her further from this de-sexualised black type. Indeed, Cicely Tyson, who appears as Rebecca, is after all too feminine and attractive to play such a

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[70] Bogle, *Toms, Coons*, p. 149. See James B. Lowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927), or the roles played by Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson or Clarence Muse, for example.

[71] See, for example, *Gone With the Wind* (1939) or *Raisin in the Sun* (1961).

role convincingly, and performs with a subtlety and intelligence unusual in the portrayal of black woman of her social status.[72]

Likewise, Nathan Lee's caring and responsible father figure was a welcome contrast to the shiftless and irresponsible African American males that were a familiar characterisation in contemporary Hollywood film, particularly black action films. Yet, conversely, his emasculation by a white racist Southern patriarchy is a trajectory of failure in comparison to blaxploitation's victorious black heroes. Shortly before his ignominious arrest in front of his stunned wife and children – unbeknownst to them the ham they had eaten that morning was stolen from a white man's house – Nathan Lee is shown heroically bowling out the opposing team in a local baseball game, a poignant reminder of his former masculine authority. As he is handcuffed and driven away the cross cuts between close-ups of Nathan Lee's sombre, defeated expression and his wife's worried yet resilient countenance signals a shift to the centrality of the African American woman to the film's themes and narrative outcome.

Indeed, soon after his search for his father ends in disappointment, David Lee meets a new mother figure, in the kind and enlightened teacher, Camille. Recognising in the young boy a mature and serious minded pupil, she invites him to come back and stay with her, and attend the all-black school where she teaches. Thus far David Lee's official education had been sporadic and in a school where the majority of children are white. However, following the return of his father, he shows an unwillingness to accept Camille's offer, but is eventually convinced by Nathan Lee that he must do so if wants to stand any chance of escaping the cruel cycle of poverty and oppression that is the black sharecropper's lot in life. Described by the black cultural critic Edward Mapp as 'a statement of personal and ethnic pride', Camille was something of an anomaly in

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[72] This analysis expands on Bogle's observation that *Sounder* avoids 'the old matriarchal set-up' of films such as *Pinky*, *The Imitation of Life* (1959), or *Raisin in the Sun*. See Bogle, *Toms*, *Coons*, p. 249.

American film, and a positive counterpoint both to the narrow stereotyping of black females as uneducated and subservient during Hollywood's classical era, and, contemporaneously, as passive sex objects in black genre films.[73]

Another noteworthy quality of *Sounder* is its measured representation of Southern society, in contrast to the post-war 'savage South' stereotype that had served to mediate white America's conscience as it began to confront the country's long legacy of racial prejudice and oppression. In place of the shrillness of such representations *Sounder* instead presents the everyday, embedded nature of racism in the South. A notable example of this is the Sheriff's petty obstinacy in refusing to reveal the whereabouts of David's imprisoned father. 'We have a policy here on coloured prisoners and I ain't about to change that,' he pedantically informs Mrs. Boatwright, the Morgan family's sympathetic white employer and friend.

Similarly, *Sounder* is considerably less sentimental than classical Hollywood's nostalgic depictions of Southern life, and presents the social and economic realities faced by the black rural poor with far greater veracity. Yet because it deploys a visual strategy that accentuates the abundant beauty of the Morgan family's rural surroundings, it is a film that nevertheless exhibits an awareness of its inter-textual relationship with past representations of the Old South, the demand for which, furthermore, had diminished little since Hollywood's golden era. That *Gone With the Wind* (1939), the apotheosis of Southern historical melodrama, was the year's second biggest grosser when it was re-released in 1967, attests to the enduring appeal of the old mythology.[74] No doubt contemporary viewers in the Civil Rights era were less accepting of the film's

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[73] Edward Mapp, 'Black Women in Films: A Mixed Bag of Tricks', in Lindsay Patterson (ed.), *Black Films and Filmmakers: A Comprehensive Anthology from Stereotype to Superhero* (New York: Dodd, Mead Co., 1973), p. 203.

[74] Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower, 2005), p. 106. The year's third highest grosser, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, starred integrationist hero, Sidney Poitier, and conveyed the contemporary white liberal idealization of race relations.

representation of benign race relations and its disparaging portrayal of the black characters than in the late 1930s. Yet despite avoiding the more overt distortions and stereotypes that have characterised the Southern film, in both its incarnations, *Sounder*'s iconographic resonances with the 'romantic ideal' entangles the film with the Southern pastoral myth and complicates its claims to historical authenticity.

Of equal significance as a source of iconographic meaning was the film's intertextual relationship to the iconic photography, literature and film of the 1930s, concerned with the plight of the millions of Americans whose lives were devastated by the country's catastrophic economic collapse.[75] The images of rural poverty captured by Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and the other photographers that worked for the Farm Securities Administration (FSA) during the Depression, are emblematic of a period of American history where, amidst the failure of institutions and the collapse in faith in the American dream, 'the people' became the focus of American culture and a source of national strength.

The FSA was one of a number of federally supported photography programs set up in the early 1930s, the primary aim of which was to create a visual record portraying the challenges of rural and urban poverty, and therefore add legitimacy to President Roosevelt's New Deal. The FSA photographers were distinguished from their peers, however, not only in their superior training and ability, but also by the integrity and real-life immediacy of their work, which succeeds in preserving the self-respect of their

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[75] These observations were prompted by the references made to FSA imagery by Pauline Kael. See 'Soul Food', *The New Yorker*, 30 September 1972, p. 109.

subjects, at the same time as it stresses the stark human consequences of the Depression.[76]

However, although the FSA produced a comparatively complex and searching record of rural poverty that 'compelled America to confront the disjunction between its ideals and reality,'[77] as art historian Barbara Haskell puts it, subversive visual statements were kept to a minimum, and the emphasis was on sentiments that sanctioned the government's rural relief and modernization program. 'The end result,' writes Frances K. Pohl, 'was a group of images marked by a sense of compassion rather than collective struggle'.[78] As such, individuals and family gatherings were generally the subjects, and strength, courage and perseverance the operative qualities, in mythopoeic images that were widely seen and served to affirm national values and assert America's will to survive. As Susan Sontag writes: 'The purpose of the project was to demonstrate the value of the people photographed. Thereby, it implicitly defined its point of view: that of middle class people that needed to be convinced that the poor were really poor, and that the poor were dignified.'[79]

At a time when the view of the solid majority of black and white cultural commentators was that black people were being represented as a series of negative stereotypes at the movies, *Sounder* had a comparable sense of purpose and point of view, which, in the

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[76] Images produced by the other government programs, by contrast, tend to affirm the progress or long-term goals of the New Deal by stressing recovery and stability. Pro-New Deal images were also produced by photographers who were not affiliated with any of the federal agencies, but these often sensationalized the experiences of the poor, and demeaned rather than dignified their subjects. See Barbara Haskell, *The American Century: Art & Culture, 1900-1950* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with W.W. Norton, 1999), pp. 250+252.

[77] Ibid., p. 245.

[78] Frances K. Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002), p. 376. The 'shooting scripts' project director Roy Stryker provided the photographers with and his practice of punching holes in the negatives of images he judged to be inappropriate, minimized any evidence of violence or organized protest, or photographs of poverty-stricken Americans that lacked decency or dignity.

[79] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Picador, 2001), p. 62.

words of one critic, was to 'emulate[s] the past to clarify and guide the present.'[80] Because, as Pohl notes, '[I]mages of mothers and children were common among FSA photographs, for they were perfect symbols of endurance in the face of disaster,'[81] then it is arguable the middle section of *Sounder*, when the father is in a prison camp and the mother and children struggle to harvest their crop of sugar cane, was particularly effective in engaging and shaping the audience's perceptions of both the past and, arguably, the present. Equally, the sight of Nathan Lee's resolute efforts to share in the burden of work on the farm, despite his debilitating injuries, inspires the belief America's disadvantaged black population possessed the fortitude to rise above social iniquity. Yet by tapping into this collective cultural memory the film's story and themes are universalized, and the socio-historical specificity of the Morgan family's experience is diminished. This is because the common but erroneous assumption, reinforced by the fact that the overwhelming majority of popular FSA images are of the white rural poor, is that the Depression was a period of American history marked by an equality of suffering between the races, thus easing the white audience's identification with the plight of the black sharecropping family. In reality the impact upon the African American rural population in the South was more severe, as thousands of black sharecroppers facing economic ruin were denied their fair share of federal aid because New Deal agencies relied upon state and local authorities, the institutional foundation of white supremacist power, to administer relief.[82]

Without its broader iconographic resonances, the accessibility and relevance to a mainstream, crossover audience of a narrative that focuses almost exclusively on the social interactions and experiences of a family of black sharecroppers, would have been

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[80] Taken from quotation of Charles Champlin, *Los Angeles Times* review in Master Review File, 'Sounder – Master Review File', Radnitz/USC.

[81] Pohl, *Framing America*, p. 377.

[82] David Brown and Clive Webb, *Race in the American South: From Slavery to Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), pp. 241-243.

significantly diminished. The FSA tropes and Southern pastoral idealism inter-textually referenced by the film reflect the commercial rationale of Martin Ritt and Robert Radnitz, both astute players in Hollywood, and their recognition of the importance of balancing social commitment and artistic credibility, with a film's ability to emotionally engage and entertain the widest possible audience.

In the national press, *Sounder*'s Depression era setting and aesthetic qualities provoked a number of favourable comparisons with the touchstone of popular yet principled filmic representations of Depression-era America, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940).[83] Directed by John Ford, the film charts the vicissitudes of a family of impoverished white dustbowl migrants, and was famously inspired by Walker Evans' collaboration with the writer James Agee on the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Insofar as both films sympathetically portray the struggles of the rural poor in the 1930s, there is a valid comparison to be made. Both adaptations, moreover, have far more optimistic endings than their source novels. Yet, despite this alteration to John Steinbeck's book, along with the obscuring of his explicit leftist critique of capitalism, the violence, despair and desperation experienced by the Joad family and the other dust bowl migrants in John Ford's film is captured with a fidelity to the stark realism of the author's writing. A significant contributing factor to the film's evocative mood and atmosphere is the character's environment – namely the barren, open spaces of the mid-west, and the crowded migrant camps in California – powerful visual elements that underscore the gravity of their socio-economic circumstances. *Sounder*, by contrast, does not share a similar emphasis, both in narrative or visual terms. In comparison to *The Grapes of Wrath*, or, indeed, William Armstrong's novel the boy's experience or perceptions of racial injustice are downplayed, and the lush beauty of the Louisiana countryside has a dialectical relationship with obstacles confronted by the family, symbolically reinforcing their love and togetherness. Thus, in contrast to Ford's film,

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[83] See Judith Crist, 'Sounder than the Rest', *New York*, 2 November 1972, p. 70.

which was made within the comparatively conservative ideological and aesthetic parameters of the studio system, *Sounder* appears to play it safe.

The 'blaxploitation' boom and the marketing and reception of *Sounder*

Given that '"nice" blacks don't pull', and 'bad fictional morals seem again to be proving big hard cash box office', noted *Variety*'s Robert J. Landry's in his article on the recent black film explosion in the summer of 1972, no one involved in the production or marketing of *Sounder* could have predicted its eventual success.[84] Indeed, the film was rejected out of hand by all the major distributors except Twentieth Century Fox, who attempted to build the film slowly by word of mouth bookings through extensive sneak previews, followed by first runs in small, carefully selected theatres.[85] Low attendances in the first week, however, appeared to re-affirm Landry's report, and, according to Radnitz, Fox was 'ready to write it off.'[86] But in the second week box office returns increased significantly as the film received laudatory notices from many of the country's leading critics.[87]

Of course, a key factor in *Sounder*'s success was how it was defined implicitly or explicitly in contradistinction to blaxploitation and its black working class sensibilities, and aimed at a cross racial, middle class family audience. A key strategy employed to secure the approval of the commentators who addressed this demographic was the extensive detailing of the film's site and location in Twentieth Century Fox's production guide, which draws attention to the age and individual history of buildings as an index

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[84] Robert J. Landry, 'Crime Reaction Like Italians', *Variety*, 23 August 1972, p. 5.

[85] Phyllis R. Klotman, '"I Don't Ask Questions, If It Works, It Works!"' (1985), in Miller (ed.), *Martin Ritt*, p.80. 'Fox Awaits Holiday Fulfillment of 'Sounder,' Big Black Sleeper Pic', *Variety*, 27 December 1972 [*Sounder* microfiche/BFI].

[86] Harmetz, 'Robert Radnitz'.

[87] Ibid.

of the film's authenticity.[88] The sharecropper's shack, for example, was estimated to be '80 to 100 years, because of the heavy cedar of which it was made disappeared from that part of the country about that long ago.' And '[T]he jail is Clinton's old Henry W. Marston house, which was built in 1837 as a bank, was used as a Confederate hospital during the Civil War, and still bears the scars of cannonballs.'[89] Establishing authenticity stresses a historical film's 'seriousness', and promoting *Sounder*'s capacity to edify as well as entertain was an important pre-condition of a target audience of whom were ethically opposed to Hollywood's exploitation of the black urban audience. Moreover, such extra-textual strategies, as Janet Staiger argues, help to gloss over the contradictory implications of a film being both historical and universal. In other words, the discourse on the *Sounder*'s period buildings lent the film an air of historical objectivity or 'truth', a 'physical reality' that served to 'drag along' the film's submerged universal meaning and, by extension, ideological construction.[90]

Similarly, according to the guide, winning the local white community's assent to the shooting of a film about a family of black sharecroppers is deployed to underscore the film's non-controversial narrative and universal appeal: 'Since the white people of the South have come to be wary of location troupes invading their territory to make pictures about Negroes, particularly in these times when so many pictures have exploited the black man's struggle, Radnitz and the *Sounder* company were at first greeted with hard-eyed suspicion.' However, when they found out the films Radnitz and Ritt had made, 'the citizens took a warm interest in the project.'[91] Utilizing a signifier associated with

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[88] That none of the trailblazing cinemas used in Fox's slow build strategy were venues that showed black action films indicates *Sounder* was primarily aimed at this audience segment, see 'Fox Awaits'. Similarly, the audience turn out in blue collar areas of Pennsylvania and New Jersey was also low, see "Sounder' In 255 Dates, Near $8,000,000; 'Wholesome Black' Soft At Drive-Ins', *Variety*, 14 March 1973, [*Sounder* clippings/AMPAS].

[89] 'Twentieth Century Fox Production Information Guide', p. 5.

[90] Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 197-202.

[91] 'Twentieth Century Fox Production Information Guide', p. 6.

authentic Southern culture, the production notes state that the level of approval was such that the local Sheriff, after reading Armstrong's novella, 'sent over a big iron pot of gumbo to the moviemakers.'[92]

However, twenty years later, an article on the television remake of *Sounder* exposes this to be a selective account of the original film's production by revealing several incidents that, considering the film's de-emphasis of race issues, were understandably not reported at the time. Kevin Hooks, who played David Lee, recalls his first experience of 'racial phobia' just after arriving in the nearby city of Baton Rouge, when the white parents of children playing in the hotel pool quickly hauled their children out after he jumped in and started to play. On a more menacing note, Taj Mahal, who as well as writing and performing the film's blues score appears as the Morgan's family friend, Ike, recounts how 'local Klansmen' vandalized the set: 'They had to really beef-up some security around it-it got pretty serious.'[93]

Contrasting the visual strategy deployed in the film's promotional material with that of blaxploitation is also instructive in elucidating the film's class and concomitant ideological construction (see below). The signifiers used in the art work promoting black action films – expensive clothes, flashy cars, attractive women and fire arms – refer to the advertising formula for white action movies, and manifestly represent the hero's potent virility, physical prowess, stylistic integrity, and material wealth. *Sounder*, of course, celebrates the traditional values of an impoverished family of sharecroppers, not the rugged individualism of a lone hero, as communicated in the superimposed image of the Morgan family embracing on David Lee's profile on the film's promotional poster. But the reflective quality of this image, and its contrast with the exteriority of blaxploitation artwork is noteworthy because it can also be read as

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[92] Ibid., pp. 6-7.

[93] Janet Weeks, 'The Long Way Home', *TV Guide*, 18 January 2003 [*Sounder* clippings/AMPAS].

denoting both the young protagonist's nascent 'black consciousness' and, significantly, his mental and emotional development. Historically, the absence or under-development of the cognitive ability of African Americans in American popular culture had been intrinsic to the construction and maintenance of negative stereotypes. The natural proclivity of black action heroes towards violent conflict resolutions and casual sexual encounters, critics argued, merely perpetuated these damaging racial myths. Conversely, however, Priest's confident and commanding stance in the foreground and the acute or obtruding perspective on his car positioned just behind him, transmits a defiant autonomy, a sense of liberation which is largely absent from the *Sounder* poster. David Lee, by comparison, is tightly framed at the centre of a larger white square, an ambiguous visual strategy reflecting both the severe limitations and constraints that defined the African American historical experience in the Deep South during the 1930s, but also the film's safe and unthreatening white liberal aesthetic.

Fig 2.1 *Super Fly* and *Sounder* promotional posters

Underscoring the aesthetic and ideological values articulated in the promotional literature and poster imagery, and of equal importance to the Fox's marketing campaign, was the marshalling of extensive endorsements from high profile cultural, civic and religious figures, including Congressman Charles Diggs, music artist Quincy Jones, and Mrs. Martin Luther King Jr., who described watching *Sounder* as '[A] memorable evening of entertainment, stimulation and enrichment.'[94] Many of these commentators had contributed to the crescendo of dissatisfaction with black action films in the months preceding *Sounder*'s release in the autumn of 1972, and the ongoing debate became the central frame of reference in the discussion of its merits. As such, its dialectical relationship with blaxploitation's relativistic revenge fantasies became a significant factor in its success, as the concerns voiced by the critics served to enhance the film's moral, cultural and educational value in the eyes of many observers.[95] '[I]n the larger context of the present rash of shrill black exploitation films,' wrote the reviewer in the *Catholic Film Newsletter*, ''Sounder" is a unique and moving contradiction…a rare example of a valid examination of the American black experience.'[96]

Elsewhere in the national and regional press *Sounder* was widely – although not universally – praised by America's film critics, both black and white alike. The verdict of the nation's mainstream commentators was virtually unanimous, echoing the enthusiastic endorsements of the country's leading religious, civic and cultural leaders and organizations.

A feature article in the country's most widely read African American magazine publication *Ebony*, positively contrasted the film with the dominant trends in

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[94] Master Review File, p. 1.

[95] In conjunction with Fox, cinemas boosted attendances by drawing 650,000 children through group sales to schools, churches and social organisations. See 'Sounder racks up 650g Group sales', *Variety* (daily), 29 May 1973 [*Sounder* clippings/AMPAS]. A study guide was also made available [*Sounder* clippings/AMPAS].

[96] '*Sounder* Master Review File', p. 6.

contemporary black themed movies. 'In a period when exploitative "quickie" black films verge on the pornographic, and better made, adequately financed movies aimed at the black market stress sex, violence, hate and drug addiction,' stated the article, 'the movie *Sounder* comes across like a cool breeze in the heart of a steaming jungle. It's a rarity, a good picture the whole family can enjoy.'[97] 'At last,' seconded the *New York Daily News*' Kathleen Carroll, ' a film utilizing black talent that elevates rather than demeans its audience – *Sounder* is something we're in desperate need of, a compassionate, profoundly human film that can be enjoyed by everyone, black or white, young or old.'[98] Amongst liberal-intellectual critics opinion was divided, but in the estimation of *The New Yorker*'s highly influential film reviewer, Pauline Kael, *Sounder* was no less than the 'birth of black consciousness on the screen (*Shaft* and its ilk are merely in blackface).'[99]

These critics applauded the 'honest realistic filmmaking'[100] in *Sounder*, as *Life* magazine's Richard Schickel described it; the attention to period detail, naturalistic style, subtle and intelligent acting, idiomatic dialogue and blues score that combined to authentically and evocatively capture the ambience of rural life in 1930s Louisiana. Ritt's expert handling of these elements brought out the film's humanistic elements, and avoided the condescending and cloying clichés commonly associated with movies about suffering and self-sacrifice. *Sounder*'s carefully considered representation of race relations in the Deep South and how it positively contrasted with the tendentious sensationalism of other Southern films, was another quality highlighted by reviewers. Robert Warshow writes: 'I would guess that the constant humiliation and oppression that the Morgans' are seen to suffer at their hands, generally not dramatic or too overt

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[97] 'Growing up in the South', *Ebony*, October 1972, p. 82.

[98] Quoted in *Filmfacts*, 'Sounder', vol. 15, no. 13 (1972), p. 286.

[99] Kael, 'Soul Food', p. 111.

[100] Richard Schickel, 'A Family for all Families', *Life*, 20 October 1972 [*Sounder* microfiche/AMPAS].

precisely because it is a stable symptom of a stable racism, is much closer to the actual day-to-day experience of sharecroppers than beatings and lynchings.'[101] The end result, they opined, was a tasteful, compassionate and long overdue celebration of the strength, resilience and self-respect of the African American family. 'So long as this family remains a family,' declared Frances Taylor in New Orleans' *The Times-Picayune*, 'there is a future.'[102]

Taken in isolation the above qualities strongly suggest *Sounder*'s satisfying and meaningful reconstruction of a largely unexplored chapter of American history marked important progress in Hollywood's slow and laboured evolution towards a fuller articulation of African American identity and experience. Yet, if it is assumed the social, cultural and political context of its reception exerted a significant influence on these responses, and it is acknowledged the film has an inter-textual relationship with the iconography of Depression-era art and the Southern 'romantic ideal', then one must account for the potential for *Sounder*'s dialogical relationship with the present to be regressive as well as progressive. Recognizing *Sounder*'s contradictory qualities film scholar Paul S. Cowen argues while on the one hand the film's emphasis on the social interactions between the black characters 'there is clearly a potential to expand the audience's awareness of another culture from its point of view,' on the other, the film's historical setting could act as a buffer between the non-black viewer and contemporaneous race issues: 'By setting the story in the Depression-era South, non-blacks can more easily distance themselves from an appreciation of contemporary black suffering,' and could 'rationalize current prejudicial attitudes by arguing that the

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[101] Warshow, 'Sounder', p. 63.

[102] Taylor, 'Sounder'.

depression was hard for everyone or that segregation was a violation of civil rights but the constitution has since been amended to protect civil rights.'[103]

Evidence of the viewer's engagement with *Sounder*'s mythic and nostalgic content suggests the film did indeed distance the audience from contemporary black suffering, but equally, if not more, persuasive are the comments indicating that the film distanced viewers from contemporary racial antagonisms and more broadly the increasingly polarized political climate of the early 1970s. In other words, *Sounder* provided a temporary haven for middle class liberals, both black and white, from the prevailing racial essentialism and nationalistic politics of Black Power, because the collective cultural memories of the 1930s it invoked reverberated with the moral values and, by implication, the integrationist ideology of the inter-racial coalition making up the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960s. In this way, the film was an aide-memoire of this era-defining struggle for the fabled 'promised land' of racial unity and harmony, which any hopes of turning into a reality had since dissipated with Black Power's ascendancy in the last half decade. This is reflected in the nostalgic tone of Kael's laudatory review, which draws a parallel between the dignity and inner strength affirmed by *Sounder*'s historical themes and aesthetic values, and the passive resistance strategy of the Civil Rights movement:

> The movie opens us up emotionally, not to them but to everything they evoke-to what they're standing in for. When the actors' faces and gestures echo the people caught by the Depression artist-photographers, we think of all those trashed lives. The characters on the screen are co-existent with the memory of black people in

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[103] Paul S. Cowen, 'A Social Cognitive Approach to Ethnicity in Films', in Lester D. Friedman (ed.), *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp. 366-67.

> the recent civil-rights demonstrations who put on their Sunday clothes on to be beaten up in.[104]

A sense of loss also marked the response of Roger Ebert, the film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, who lamented 'we live in such illiberal times that *Sounder* comes as a reminder of former dreams.'[105] The liberal consensus that engendered the historic civil rights legislation in the mid-1960s began to crumble soon after, with four consecutive years of race rioting in the country's deprived inner-city areas, and student protests against the Vietnam War and the 'system' in general, all contributing to a conservative backlash that brought Republican Richard Nixon to the White House on a law and order ticket in November 1968. To Ebert, the skepticism inherent in the country's shift to the right made the optimistic narrative of *Sounder* all the more poignant.

In contrast to the laudatory notices from the likes of Kael and Ebert a small but significant number of white liberal-intellectual commentators and black cultural critics voiced an opposing viewpoint by dismissing *Sounder* as oversimplified, moralistic and lacking in contemporary relevance. Their response to black action movies, although offering more differentiation, was similarly unfavorable and on the whole echoed the objections voiced by the mainstream media.

As champions of the auteurist cinema produced by European new wave directors and Hollywood's great studio artists, or, indeed, some of the contemporary American directors whose iconoclastic approach to genre filmmaking straddled both these traditions it is not surprising liberal-intellectual critics showed little enthusiasm for either the naïve realism of *Sounder* nor the crass commercialism of the majority of black action films. In their view, the former was a rather banal movie that

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[104] Kael, 'Soul Food', p. 110.

[105] *Filmfacts*, 'Sounder', p. 288.

anachronistically harked back to superior Southern films such as King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929). And the latter were crude and offensive blood-letting fantasies that traded in cheap, visceral thrills. Neither possessed the narrative, thematic or aesthetic sophistication these commentators admired, nor did they liberate black cinematic representations from the familiar stereotypes and clichés of the past, as some observers had claimed.

Indeed, in contrast to the film's plaudits that emphasised its timeless and universal qualities, *Sounder* was, in the opinion of the film reviewer in New York's left-wing newspaper, *Guardian*, a 'quarter century behind times.'[106] Moreover, 'it is a film that virtually announces nobility,' wrote *The New York Times*' Roger Greenspun, and 'has been endorsed by everybody with the exception of God,'[107] complained his fellow *Times*' critic Vincent Canby. In this way, some critics suggested the film's determinedly safe and non-controversial content was contrived to exploit the present day conflict over issues of race. 'Here we are back in Sidney Poitier land,' wrote Margaret Tarratt, 'in a kind of black man's *Grapes of Wrath*. *Sounder* ... is one of that suspect brand of films, the deliberately apolitical social drama peopled with recognizable realist stereotypes and without any relation to present day attitudes and movements.'[108]

The ideological aims of the Civil Rights movement and Poitier's accommodationist roles were, by the early 1970s, no longer tenable. The intervening period after the historic legislative victories of the mid-1960s had exposed how socio-economic advancement, or 'integration', was available only to the few, not the many, and, accordingly, Poitier's middle class screen persona had been largely discredited as a

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[106] Irwin Silber, 'Quarter Century Behind Times', *Guardian*, 11 October 1972 [*Sounder* clippings/ AMPAS].

[107] Roger Greenspun, 'Screen: 'Sounder' Opens: Story of a Negro Boy in Louisiana of 1930's', *The New York Times*, 25 December 1972; Vincent Canby, 'All But 'Super Fly' Fall Down', *The New York Times*, 12 November 1972, clippings in 'Sounder – Vincent Canby N.Y. Times article', Radnitz/USC.

[108] Margaret Tarratt, 'Sounder', *Films and Filming*, February 1973.

liberal illusion with little relation to the social experience of the majority of African Americans. With its focus on a poor family of black sharecroppers *Sounder* had a far greater potential to mediate the experience and address the needs of the black working classes, but contrived to remain within the safe and comfortable bounds of what were dismissed as 'yesterday's political passions.'[109] The cultural and political frames of reference that shaped many of these responses to *Sounder*'s period representation was, by contrast, informed by the revolutionary stirrings and black cinematic heroes of the early 1970s. Black film critic Sharon Bell Mathis questioned 'the complete absence of black protest. Not the "march and protest" variety, but the time-worn methods that Blacks have always used to survive in this country.' Later reflecting, '[M]aybe I've been spoiled by the current crop of Black films. I want to win now. All the time….I wanted the Morgan family to fight back. At least once.'[110] The contention of these critics was that the Morgans were too polite, happy and harmonious considering how precarious their existence was.

However, echoing the argument black action films were judged according to more exacting standards than their 'white' generic counterparts, a letter in *The New York Times* responding to an article written by Louisiana born, black cultural critic Lindsay Anderson that hotly disputed *Sounder*'s credibility, expressed doubt over whether the film's 'white' equivalents had ever come under such close scrutiny. 'I wonder if "The Grapes of Wrath" met with the same reaction from White Okies when it made its bid for attention?' wrote Leo B. Porter. Anyway, in Porter's opinion, one should assume a clear discrepancy between 'history' according to Hollywood and the probable realities of life during the period depicted. 'As a Black filmgoer I didn't expect any more "tell it like it was" Truth and Light from "Sounder" than I expected from "Fiddler on the Roof".'[111]

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[109] Silber, 'Quarter'.

[110] Sharon Bell Mathis, 'Sounder is Baad' [sic], *Encore*, December 1972 [*Sounder* clippings/AMPAS].

[111] Leo B. Porter, 'Sad Spectacle' in 'Movie Mailbag', *The New York Times*, 26 November 1972, clipping in 'Sounder – Vincent Canby N.Y. Times article', Radnitz/USC.

The film's perceived lack of historical validity amongst liberal-intellectual commentators was also underscored by its aesthetic values. To Andrew Sarris, film reviewer at the *Village Voice* and perhaps *Sounder*'s most hostile critic, it was a cinematic throwback that 'managed to land only a stone's throw from "Uncle Tom's Cabin"', yet, in so doing, he asserted, it established a reassuring distance between 'we otherwise guilt-ridden New Yorkers' and their own private prejudices: 'How comforting it is to re-visit the Old South in which other people's bigotry can be lumped together with another region's provincialism. Indeed, is it not even more comforting to see blacks tilling the soil once more so far from Morningside heights and Central Park West.'[112]

A broader and more detailed picture of *Sounder*'s reception is enabled through the analysis of letters Martin Ritt and Robert Radnitz received from people who attended previews or saw the film on its wider release. The majority of these letters were written by teachers and their pupils, or employees of community or educational organizations, as well as a small proportion by non-affiliated individuals or 'fans', and on the whole echoed the positive responses of the nation's cultural commentators and high profile public figures.

One letter to Ritt from conservative authority figure and Hollywood icon, John Wayne, for example, highlighted the ideological significance the film obtained in the racially and politically polarized climate of the early seventies. 'I think *Sounder* is one of the most beautiful pictures I've ever seen', wrote Wayne. 'It will do more for the blacks than all the phony liberals and black panthers could do in twenty years.'[113] Letters from African American respondents were as equally enthusiastic. Actor Joel Fluellen, who had grown up in Monroe, Louisiana, spoke of the vivid and powerful childhood

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[112] Andrew Sarris, *Village Voice*, 12 October 1972 [*Sounder* microfiche/BFI].

[113] John Wayne to Martin Ritt (letter), February 1973, 30.f-317, Ritt/AMPAS.

memories the film had evoked, stating that he was ‘angry at the beginning’, but also that he had 'cried in remembrance of the old church hymns which were part of my childhood.' Affirming the film’s claims to authenticity he added: ‘I marveled at the depth of your understanding of black people in that particular era which even now exists. Every one of your characters was real.'[114]

Yet a few black respondents suggested that because the struggle of the Morgan family did not merely represent a memory of times past, but was, indeed, a contemporary reality for many blacks, that *Sounder* was of more instructive value for the white audience. In the opinion of a group of female professionals the film was ‘a very sensitive and well-done piece of media,’ but was ‘something that is redundant at least for adult blacks. It is possible for young, black children it might be of some value, but since black people, adults anyway, have experienced this and still experience it, I think it is not something that they benefit from.’ But, she adds, ‘I certainly think it has value for whites, and would see that it has something that could be an educational kind of tool that could be used.’[115]

For young, educated African Americans, who perhaps could not identify so closely with the socio-economic hardships endured by the black rural poor in the 1930s, the film was nonetheless of significant cultural value, and informed their understanding of contemporary black identity. Yet, similarly, there was a degree of ambivalence regarding the period characterizations. In a letter to Ritt, Eric, a young actor and playwright discusses Ike, the Morgan family’s jovial, blues-guitar playing family friend: 'Taj Mahal certainly deserves an honourable mention for his down home, down to earth, downright excellent portrayal of black humour in the folk medium. It has a classical power of its own, for it still resounds in our conversations and in the high, most sophisticated organs

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[114] Joel Fluellen to Martin Ritt (letter), 2 October 1972, 30.f-316, Ritt/AMPAS.

[115] Elizabeth Connell to Robert Radnitz (letter), ‘Sounder - Fan Comments/Letters’, Radnitz/USC.

of our intellectual society of today. Even though, until recently, some us would not have been found dead with a character like Ike.'[116] Eric's comments indicate the persistence in the black cultural memory of the demeaning and simplistic manner in which blacks have historically been represented in American popular culture. The happy, singing and dancing negro stereotype was a popular generic feature of many films set in the antebellum South produced during Hollywood's classical period. Ironically, as Campbell observes, the music included in these films was one of the few authentic aspects of African American culture.[117] Ike clearly defied the respondent's expectations, however, and was a character that contrasted with popular culture's historically narrow and derogatory representations of America's black cultural heritage. This characteristion was also indicative of a broader cultural shift, and how in recent years this heritage was increasingly undergoing a process of reclamation and recuperation amidst the rising tide of black pride and consciousness.

The letters Ritt and Radnitz received also revealed a range of different responses to the film's mytho-historical construction. In contrast to the more ambivalently nostalgic personal memories of Fluellen, the comments of a white respondent, Elma Jebhart, are imbued with a comparatively inauthentic and problematically romanticised nostalgic sentiment that demonstrates the film's tendency, as emphasized by Sarris, to become entangled in the Southern pastoral myth and evade contemporary realities:

> The scenery through the entire picture was beautiful, the mist coming up over the hills, the water around and the moss from the trees. Several years ago we were in Mer Rouge Louisiana and saw the moss hanging from the trees in the swamps, and also visited in a cabin of a real black family with 10 children, all of whom

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[116] Morris Hill to Martin Ritt (letter), 1972, 30.f-317, Ritt/AMPAS.

[117] Campbell, *The Celluloid*, p. 19.

> worked in the cotton fields. We did so want to take a picture of them but the mother said no, she was afraid it might get into the movies.[118]

In comparison to Jebhart' s romanticized perspective on the South, a number of responses in the national press evinced a divided attention when it came to the *Sounder* and its mythic construction. Many of the commentators acknowledged the film was either 'nostalgic,'[119] or had 'the quality of a fairy-tale or fable,'[120] but these relatively understated aesthetic elements, they maintained, were easily negotiable and therefore did not significantly detract from its historical validity, or social, cultural and moral value. In the opinion of one white fan, by comparison, these tendencies served to enhance the validity and value these critics had remarked upon. In a letter to director Martin Ritt, respondent Stephen Wistar praised the 'accuracy and authenticity' of the acting, and stated, 'I only wish that your film could have lasted longer - for a full day, so that I could have gotten yet a deeper taste of what it was to be black and living in 1933 Louisiana.' On the subject of the film's visual content he wrote:

> The striking camera work the director of filming conjured up seems surreal in its beauty. Maybe the natural landscapes of the parishes of that region of Louisiana are commonly so magnificent; in any case…. I came away from the theatre with the unshakeable feeling that the fullness of the plants and the growth in nature was intertwined with the fullness of the love of the family whose home was set in its

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[118] Elma Jebhart to Robert Radnitz (letter), 2 September 1972, 'Sounder - Press Thank you Notes Ohio', Radnitz/USC. An example of a contrasting view on *Sounder* came from a sixth-grader from Long Beach, California who wrote: 'We thought the book was a very moving and beautiful story. It was very real. In fact I know the things in this book have happened many times in our country and continue to happen. Why, then, did you make the movie more like a fairy tale. Fairy tales always have happy endings. But life is not this way.' On the whole the responses of this class were far more positive. See 'Sounder - Fan Comments/Letters', Radnitz/USC.

[119] Toni Morrison, 'Film Find: A Really Good Movie About Blacks', *Ms.*, December 1972 [*Sounder* microfiche/AMPAS].

[120] Warshow, 'Sounder', p. 63.

midst.[121]

As the response of Wistar demonstrates, it is the accord in *Sounder* between its mythic content on the one hand, and its historical verisimilitude on the other that contributed to its popular reception. That is, its documentary-style realism and attention to period detail asserts its authority and authenticity, while its implicit mythic qualities, which are obscured to a greater or lesser degree by the film's naturalistic aesthetic, succeeded in turning the ordinary into the extraordinary; by investing the experiences of a poor, black sharecropping family with a particular significance, both in terms of affect and universal meaning. In reconciling these apparently contradictory elements – history with affect and universal meaning – they became mutually reinforcing. Thus, from the perspective of the film's target audience, or those viewers most receptive to its ideological construction, its mythos helped to validate the film as 'history', and vice versa; the meaning or value invested in the film by these qualities are validated by its perceived historical authenticity.

The responses of cinemagoers less receptive to *Sounder*'s ideological construction, namely fans of black action films, were not represented in the letters sent to the film's director and producer. Equally, there was a discrepancy between the evident popularity and success of 'blaxploitation' and its broadly negative public reception, suggesting the opinions of its core audience were severely under-represented in the nation's media. However, despite the validity of some of the issues pertaining to the exploitative nature of black genre filmmaking, these so-called 'realistic fantasies'[122] featured distinct visual and narrative pleasures that well assessed the desires, needs and, arguably, the beliefs, of the under-25 black inner-city resident at the time. The earnest portrayal of a poor, rural family's dignified suffering in *Sounder*, by contrast, was, as one white reviewer

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[121] Stephen Wistar to Martin Ritt (letter), 1973, 30.f-317, Ritt/AMPAS.

[122] Stanley Kauffmann, 'The Mack', *The New Republic*, 16 June 1973, p. 20.

recognised, 'not so much a black fantasy as a black nightmare.'[123] Gordon Parks, director of *Shaft* and *The Learning Tree* writes:

> "[S]ounder"…was a beautiful and important film. And I would like to feel I could say the same of "The Learning Tree". But both films speak of era that young black people, now in the heat of revolt, tend to reject. They do not want again to endure the cruelties and indignities inflicted on black people in the past; they cannot identify with the men and women, however gallant, who suffered that voiceless time. They refuse to look back. Their eyes are on the future.[124]

For young, black people, in other words, *Sounder* overwhelmingly represented a period of powerlessness and suffering, which the qualities that endeared the film to middle class audiences - the Morgan family's tenderness, dignity and fortitude – did little to ameliorate. This comparatively disadvantaged and disaffected social group had different priorities that were influenced by the problems and issues arising from contemporary urban poverty and deprivation, and the activism and identity politics of Black Power, and were therefore not best served by a film set during a period and in a place where open resistance or the assertion of racial difference were simply not available as responses to racial injustice. According to one African American interviewed for a feature article on black film in *Time* magazine:

> 'Sounder' was made for whites who want to believe that blacks are full of love and trust and patience. It avoids dealing with things like rage and bitterness and the need for some kind of release. Those kind of people don't survive here on the streets of New York. I took a girl to see 'Sounder' who used to do laundry for

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[123] Paul D. Zimmerman, 'Black Nightmare', *Newsweek*, 2 October 1972 [*Sounder* Microfiche/AMPAS].

[124] 'Black Movie Boom-Good or Bad?', *The New York Times*, 17 December 1972 [*Sounder* clippings/ AMPAS].

> white people. She wasn't going to be entertained by a film about black suffering, because she *knows* about black suffering.[125]

Black action films, by contrast, though often crude and sensationalized, featured the first potent black heroes Hollywood had produced and, moreover, pertained to the contemporary socio-cultural experience of young African Americans. They also provided direct pleasures that were entirely absent from *Sounder* - namely sex and violence – the twin channels through which the viewer could sublimate his or her frustrations. For young black males in particular, the action hero's sexual conquests, violent victories and economic gains palliated the feelings of disempowerment or emasculation symptomatic of their marginalized status and disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances. Of equal importance was the urban context of the action, which, Gordon Stulberg, head of Twentieth Century Fox, opined, gives 'blacks more opportunity to feel vicariously in control of their environment than whites get from James Bond movies.'[126] That characters such as *Superfly*'s Priest were able to resist white oppression, at the same time as surviving, indeed, prospering in the ghetto, injected political significance into the genre in the opinion of some critics.[127] Similar significance was attached to the hero's sartorial and performative style. In the absence of many of the opportunities available to whites, style is a form of control that becomes an important means of self-assertion, and acts as an index of both the hero's labour and his economic potential. 'Why so much concern for appearance?' writes Kronengold. 'Black action films suggest that the performance of everyday acts with style has political consequences… If the characters act all tired, with no style, they will fail.

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[125] Michener, 'Black Movies', p. 81.

[126] Ibid., p. 78.

[127] Kaufman, *American Culture*, pp. 99-100.

Political speculation requires that some kind of aesthetic integrity be put up as collateral.'[128]

In contrast to the dominant heroes of blaxploitation popular with the black youth in the early 1970s, Nathan Lee, by comparison, was a downtrodden man, reminiscent of the mythic black types from the first half-century of Hollywood film-making. To fans of the film his acceptance of the consequences of his theft and then his subsequent injury in prison, which leaves him struggling to help out with the farm-work on his return, was a rich source of pathos but also served to highlight his dedication and responsibility towards his family. For the black, inner city audience, on the other hand, whose principal desire was for cathartic and empowering representations of African American masculinity, one can speculate Nathan Lee was the inverse - an emasculated male representation whose comparatively modest virtues held limited value. Limping heavily and dressed in a pair of raggedy dungarees, his character lacked aesthetic integrity and therefore failed to engage culturally or politically with the desires or aspirations of this audience segment.

Conclusion

Emphasising the way in which contemporary concerns are refracted through the lens of the historical film, this chapter has examined how the release of *Sounder* became a significant focal point in a period marked by increasingly divergent values, attitudes and beliefs concerning race and its representation. At the same time as broadening out the narrow definition of black themed filmmaking during this period, Martin Ritt's sensitive, semi-documentary portrait of the African American historical experience nostalgically references the iconography of the Southern romantic ideal and popular cultural representations of the Depression era, and reflects the white liberal sensibilities

[128] Quoted in ibid., p. 100.

of the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, although it is arguable blaxploitation perpetuated regressive racial myths, the urban themes and outlaw heroes featured in these films had hitherto been denied African American audiences and were, in contrast, a truer articulation of the experiences and attitudes of a significant proportion of America's young, black urban population during the early 1970s.

As such, the reception of *Sounder* was shaped as much by class, age and gender, as it was race; factors that were brought into sharper relief by the controversy surrounding the Blaxploitation boom and the wider discourse on race relations. The film's naturalism, period setting, emphasis on character, and universal moral and family themes attracted a racially mixed, predominantly middle class, adult and family audience, and may have appealed to young, black female cinema-goers alienated by the masculinist narratives of black action films. A small but significant minority of white liberal-intellectual and black film reviewers, while broadly condemning blaxploitation for its crude stereotyping, concurred with its core audience by criticising *Sounder* for being over-simplistic, clichéd and lacking contemporary relevance. Historical authenticity notwithstanding, the hard-scrabble existence of the acquiescent rural poor during the 1930s was inimical to the mood of disaffection and frustration in many deprived inner city areas during the early 1970s. Young, working class, black cinemagoers wanted to see anger and resistance up on the screen, channelled through formidable heroes who exhibited the style, spoke the vernacular, and inhabited the contemporary urban milieu with which they could identify.

Chapter 3: 'Having Our Cake and Eating it': *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), the World War II Combat Film and Vietnam

Hollywood's output of war films between 1968 and 1978 is notable for its evasion of America's catastrophic interventionist war in Vietnam (1964-1972) on the side the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) against North Vietnam and its communist allies. The sole Vietnam war film released during the conflict, *The Green Berets* (1968), was produced by and starred conservative screen legend John Wayne, an outspoken critic of the country's burgeoning anti-war movement, and it became the focus of societal division. Wayne had appeared in a number of iconic World War II combat movies, such as *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and *The Longest Day* (1962), and *The Green Berets* was firmly in this mould, evoking the mythos of the Second World War in an effort to explain and justify the Vietnam War by framing it as a patriotic and vitally important conflict between American rightness and malign totalitarianism. However, the film's traditional moral binaries and its glorification of the war were strongly contested by the increasingly pessimistic media coverage of the nature, course and probable outcome of the conflict, and condemned by many of the country's leading cultural commentators . Yet in spite and no doubt to some extent because of its hostile reception, Wayne's picture was a solid box office hit, indicating that the war still enjoyed significant support.[1] Hollywood nevertheless remained unconvinced that investing in further movie treatments of America's controversial and increasingly unpopular overseas conflict was sufficiently risk-free, and instead chose to focus almost exclusively on the Second World War, its hitherto tried and trusted historical setting for combat films, the war genre's key mode, and other war related pictures. In any case, the bitter fighting and

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[1] *The Green Berets* made $9.75 million in domestic rentals. See Lawrence Cohn, 'All-Time Rental Champs', *Variety*, 10 May 1993, section C, p. 88.

slaughter in Vietnam beamed nightly into living rooms across the nation, described by Jeanine Basinger as 'a kind of insane combat film', had largely superseded the need for fiction films that dramatised the war contemporaneously.[2] However, the cumulative affect of this coverage, and the growing resignation amongst Americans that Vietnam was a war that could not be won, would in the end have wider impact, as between the end of 1970 and the release of *Midway* in 1976 no major U.S. war movies were released at all.[3]

In spite of the absence of the Vietnam War from the nation's movie screens between 1968 and 1978, it was nonetheless a significant shaping influence, and the Hollywood war films produced during this period broadly reflect the range and polarity of public opinion concerning the conflict. On the one hand, releases such as *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), Twentieth Century-Fox's big budget dramatisation of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor satisfied the need for patriotic narratives of war. While on the other hand, the absurdist military hospital satire and popular hit *M*A*S*H** (1970), set during the Korean War, for example, registered widespread opposition to U.S. military intervention in South East Asia. *M*A*S*H** belonged to wave of films that began to emerge from around the middle of the 1960s that inverted, parodied or satirised the war film, which was both inspired by the Vietnam War, and also by the wider social, cultural and generational discord and unrest of the late sixties that the conflict acted to intensify.[4] Indeed, many films produced during this period were geared towards the tastes and

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[2] Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 201.

[3] Vietnam was also a structuring presence in other genres, throughout the late 1960s and 1970s. 'Vietnam westerns' such as *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Soldier Blue* (1970), for example, sought to revise U.S. race history and question traditional myths, and could be read allegorically as damning indictments of domestic racial conflict, namely Civil Rights, or America's ethnic and ideological war in South-East Asia.

[4] The assassination of Martin Luther King on the 4 April 1968 was the catalyst for the worst outbreak of urban rioting in the nation's history, as African Americans vented their frustration and anger. 55,000 federal and state troops were deployed to restore order. Two months after King's death, the fatal shooting of Robert Kennedy, the Democratic presidential candidate nominee, profoundly shocked the nation. Similarly, the violent suppression of demonstrators outside the the Democratic convention in Chicago by the city's uncompromising Mayor highlighted the country's deep divisions at the time. See Larry H. Addington, *America's War in Vietnam: A Short Narrative History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 124-125.

sensibilities of the under-25 year old cinemagoer or baby boom generation, the largest audience demographic and the most likely to be critical of the war. As a consequence, the moral superiority inherent in previous World War II narratives was upended and conventions of the genre mocked, reflecting the widespread disaffection amongst the young. Still, in spite of these subversive tendencies, in certain films continuities with a number of established generic characteristics, namely dramatic action and rugged individualism, indicate a more complex and contradictory picture. The picture that emerges is that between the strong divergences of opinion in the late 1960s, there were also many people who felt profoundly ambivalent about Vietnam and, more broadly, U.S. society and its values.[5]

One of the first and most successful films to embody these crosscurrents and, moreover, appeal to a broad cross section of the U.S. public, from hawks through to doves, was Robert Aldrich's World War II combat picture *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), the story of twelve soldiers convicted of serious crimes who are offered the commutation of their sentences for undertaking a brutal and highly dangerous mission behind Nazi lines. As Aldrich maintained at the time, the film 'is not so much anti-war as anti-authoritarian', and is a comment on 'the pathetic steamroller psychology of officers in everyday warfare', a thematic slant that chimed with the anti-establishment attitudes of many young Americans in the late 1960s, but did not necessarily preclude a pro-war perspective.[6] Indeed, ameliorated by its narrative of redemptive struggle, masculine humour and climactic combat sequences, this theme can also be read the other way, advancing the paradoxical view that the illiberal practices of the military underpin America's success in armed conflict, and affirming war as a necessary part of its global guardianship of freedom and democracy. Despite dividing the critics, the film's

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[5] See Maurice Isserman, and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and M. J. Heale, *The Sixties in America: History, Politics and Protest* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

[6] Robert Windeler, 'Aldrich: To Shut up and Take Your Lumps', *The New York Times*, 3 September 1967, Box 59, 'Dirty Dozen Clippings Part II', Robert Aldrich Collection, Louis B. Mayer Library, American Film Institute, Los Angeles, California.

ambivalence, it will be argued, was key to its commercial success - it returned over $20 million in domestic rentals, finishing the year as the fourth highest earning movie[7] - and it is also crucial to our understanding of the production's cultural significance as a mediation of a pivotal period in late twentieth century American history.

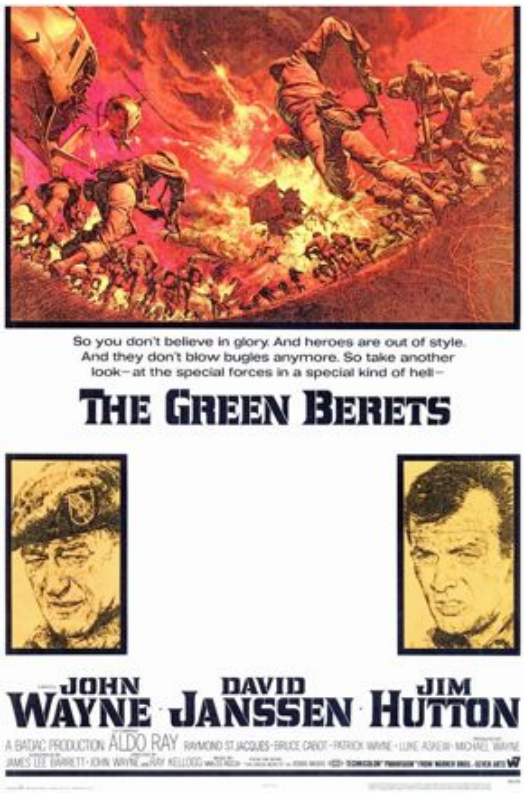

Fig 3.1 *Green Berets* promotional poster

Talking about the war

During a career that spanned four decades and produced 30 credited films, Robert Aldrich worked in wide range of different genres, and established himself as one of the most talented, individual and audacious directors working in Hollywood. Whether it was the apocalyptic noir of *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), the gothic melodrama of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) or the prison drama *The Longest Yard* (1974), the

[7] Cohn, 'All-Time' p. 84.

energy, immediacy and iconoclastic intent of Aldrich's work reflected an astute understanding of the medium's capacity for captivating entertainment, at the same time as its potential for conveying provocative and subversive themes. In adopting this attitude and approach to two of America's most established historical genres, in films such as *The Dirty Dozen* or the 'Vietnam' Western *Ulzana's Raid* (1972), the director produced some of his best work, which echoes and extends the characteristically cynical and brutal worldview evident in his other films, and evinces an astute understanding of how the past can be re-fashioned for contemporary use.

Although Aldrich was born into a rich and illustrious east coast family of political leaders and business tycoons, he decided at young age that his ambitions lay elsewhere, and after an uncle with investments in RKO arranged for him to work at the studio, he moved to Hollywood to pursue a career in the film industry. Starting at the bottom of the career ladder as a production clerk in 1941, he quickly ascended to the position of first assistant director, his progress accelerated by the wartime draft of many industry personnel, and worked alongside some of Hollywood's most revered writers and directors such as Lewis Milestone, Charlie Chaplin, Jean Renoir, William Wellman, Robert Rossen, Abraham Polonsky and Joseph Losey. The progressive ideals that marked the work of these men, and which had been profoundly shaped by the social issues and affirmative action arising from America's catastrophic economic collapse of the 1930s, would be a guiding influence in Aldrich's own directorial efforts. Another key influence both on the director and many of his Hollywood mentors was Clifford Odets, an emblematic figure in the Cultural Front movement of the 1930s, whose influential plays such as *Awake and Sing* (1935) and *Goldenboy* (1937) strived to articulate the overwhelming physical and spiritual struggle of Depression America's poor and disenfranchised.[8]

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[8] Tony Williams, *Body and Soul: The Cinematic Vision of Robert Aldrich* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), pp. 3-5.

When Aldrich came to direct his first feature-length film in the 1950s, however, the freedom and integrity of American culture in the 1930s and up to the immediate post Second World War period had dissipated, and progressivism was in retreat. The 'Red Scare' of the late 1940s and early 1950s had destroyed the social and political hopes that had gained legitimacy in the previous decade and were sustained by the tentative surge of liberalism in America arising from its involvement in the Second World War. In the cultural sphere this had been effected by the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigations into individual's alleged communist associations. As Tony Williams notes 'Aldrich began his career as a film director in the year following Odets' infamous testimony [to HUAC].... Although the playwright only mentioned the names of individuals who had already been named and supplied no further information, the spectacle of one of the major influences of the 1930s grovelling before this appalling institution must have affected all those who were inspired by his plays.'[9]

Indeed, Aldrich's films channel the view that the immoral and oppressive 'system' that had engendered the material excesses and inequities of the 1920s, and wrought the socio-economic devastation of the 1930s, not only remained intact but was resurgent and asserting its ideological will during the 1950s. Though not explicitly political, his films nonetheless bear the figurative scars of this grim reality. Depicting narrative worlds where violence and betrayal are commonplace, and self delusion and hubris a perpetual threat, his work exhibits a level of righteous indignation which sometimes verges on the nihilistic. However, this level of anger and rejection does not preclude the possibility of redemption, and what Aldrich believed 'entitles you to that blessing, if there is a blessing', was the individual's courageous and self-affirming struggle for survival in a bleak and hostile universe.[10] Arnold and Miller write:

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[9] Ibid., pp. 17-18.
[10] Edwin T. Arnold, and Eugene L. Miller (eds.), *Robert Aldrich: Interviews*, *Conversations with Filmmakers Series* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), p. ix.

> He had a simple but deeply held view of the world. He believed that existence was conflict, that power inevitably corrupts, and that the honest man was bound to lose no matter how "right" or "moral" his intentions. Nevertheless, even though the cards were stacked against you, he believed that you had an almost existential obligation to hold to your basic principles. Compromise was another word for betrayal. His films illustrated this belief again and again, and his professional life was an unusually rocky one, filled with great successes and unmitigated disasters, in large part because of his adherence to this standard.[11]

Aldrich himself acknowledged the broad conceptual theme of redemptive struggle recurred in his work, but rejected the notion his films contained any deep and complex meanings. Indeed, Aldrich's remarkable run of idiosyncratic genre films in the mid-1950s - *Kiss Me Deadly* (film noir), *Apache* (western,1954), *Vera Cruz* (western, 1954), *The Big Knife* (film noir, 1955) and *Attack!* (combat film) - attracted the attention of the French *Cahiers du Cinema* critics. The seminal theory of film authorship they propounded attributed all meaning to directors whose oeuvre displayed distinctive stylistic traits and recurrent thematic preoccupations, such as Aldrich, Orson Welles and Howard Hawks. As a director who approached filmmaking first and foremost as an entertainment medium, not a conduit for profound philosophical statements, Aldrich accused the *Cahiers* critics of inferring too much meaning.[12] However, on a great number of his films he worked with the same key production personnel, indicating that he was at least implicitly concerned with sustaining some degree of aesthetic distinctiveness across his work, but also that he recognised filmmaking was a collaborative process of which he was only a component part. *The Dirty Dozen*, for

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[11] Ibid., p. viii.
[12] Ian Cameron and Mark Shivas, 'Interview with Robert Aldrich' (1963), in Arnold and Miller (eds.), *Robert Aldrich*, p. 24.

instance, was editor Michael Luciano's eleventh Aldrich film.[13] The director's loyalty to his leading men further supports this view. Mirroring Aldrich's own formidable personality and imposing physical presence, actors such as Burt Lancaster, Lee Marvin and Burt Reynolds were employed regularly because their macho physicality, single mindedness and forthright manner made them the most appropriate and compelling protagonists for his 'parables of survival.'[14] Although Aldrich's characters are often not particularly attractive or likeable, they are nonetheless rendered understandable and ambivalently heroic by the relative morality and physical demands of their environment.

The Dirty Dozen (1965), E. M. Nathanson's novel about a 'suicidal' mission behind German lines on the eve of D-Day undertaken by a group of U.S. soldiers convicted of a variety of serious crimes, was well suited to Aldrich's brand of exciting, yet subversive cinematic entertainment. It contained action and adventure, the overarching theme of redemptive struggle, but also, crucially, challenged the received wisdom that the Second World War was unequivocally a 'good war', and would enable the director to flout many of the 'rules' of the genre. In Nathanson's novel the 'heroes' are the convicted soldiers held in an American military prison in England. The 'villains', on the other hand, belong to the military establishment, both the high command of the German army, the target of their mission, and that of the U.S. army, whose lofty attitude to the business of war pays scant regard to its human cost. The validity of such a revisionist stance notwithstanding, the fact the story was 'pure invention', as Nathanson described it, was of little concern to Aldrich. Of equal if not more importance than either this historical counter-narrative or its plausibility, however, was the story's eminent potential to achieve commercial success in America's contemporary cultural climate. This was not only due to its violent action content, a staple of the genre, but also because it had the

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[13] Allen Eyles, 'The Private War of Robert Aldrich', *Films and Filming*, September 1967, Box 59, 'Dirty Dozen Clippings Part II', Aldrich/AFI.
[14] Alain Silver, and James Ursini, *What Ever Happened to Robert Aldrich?: His Life and His Films* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1995), p. 128.

potential to capture the growing mood of disaffection amongst what would come to be widely referred to as the Vietnam-generation, at a time when, besides from the anomalous *The Green Berets*, Hollywood had distanced itself from America's controversial overseas war. The year before *The Dirty Dozen* went into production Aldrich expressed his frustration in an interview with Peter Bogdanovich at the impossibility of making films dealing with controversial subjects in Hollywood: 'What happens if you want to make a picture on Vietnam..... there's not a chance to make a film about that.'[15] An adaptation of Nathanson's novel could at least, covertly speaking, go some way to satisfying this desire.

Indeed, such was Aldrich's recognition of the potential of the story, he attempted to buy the rights to the book before a first draft had even been written and it existed only as a working outline.[16] Despite the director's keen interest, the property was purchased by MGM and it appeared his desire to direct the film adaptation of the book would not be realised. However, dissatisfaction with a number of initial attempts to produce a screenplay led eventually to Aldrich being drafted onto the project. The film's producer was Kenneth Hyman, who had been involved with *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*.[17] After Aldrich had read the screenplay, which had been written by the veteran Hollywood screenwriter Nunnally Johnson, he sent a memo to Hyman in early 1966 stressing that although Johnson had produced 'in many instances a fine script', its '1940 flavour' and '1950 point of view [...] must be updated':

> What you and Nunnally have perhaps not recognised (and very, very few people have) is that the rules of the game have suddenly changed..... The anti-establishment attitudes... the revolt of youth... [and] the war on authority is not

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[15] Peter Bogdanovich, 'Robert Aldrich' (1964), in Arnold and Miller (eds.), *Robert Aldrich*, p. 39.
[16] Edwin T. Arnold, and Eugene L. Miller, *The Films and Career of Robert Aldrich*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), p. 123.
[17] *The Dirty Dozen* was a venture of Hyman's MKH productions.

> just in the West; anarchy and rebellion against systems that have proved phoney, hypocritical and tyrannical are the banners of the future, and this is not a philosophical/political polemic but a fact of life.... God (or whoever else you hold dear) forgive us if we should shoot this current script as is, and release it during an American escalation of the war in the Far East, or, even worse, during a period when the realities of war had brought about a psychological revolution of Western attitudes and forced a humiliating withdraw.[18]

Aldrich's understanding of this broader shift as it pertained to America's deepening involvement in Vietnam was formed during a period when the vast majority of Americans supported the war. However, following the decision of the Lyndon Johnson administration to escalate the conflict and deploy troops on the ground in spring 1965, opposition began to increase and intensify, particularly amongst the country's student population angered by government policy and fearful of the draft.[19] By December, the army's troop deployment had been pushed up to to 200,000 in order to support large scale offensive operations, but contrary to the official line, 'complete with "fronts" and "big victories" and a sense of driving, goal-directed energy,'[20] writes Daniel C. Hallin, the reality was the U.S. army had become mired in a grinding war of attrition. Inevitably U.S. casualties mounted, rising from 1,639 in early 1966 to 19,021 by the end of 1967.[21]

Against this backdrop Lukas Heller, a writer who had worked on three of Aldrich's recent films, imposed a contemporary viewpoint on the screenplay by emphasising the

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[18] Robert Aldrich to Kenneth Hyman (letter), 28 January 1966, Box 60, f.9, Aldrich/AFI.

[19] This led to a marked increase in membership of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) - the leading campus anti-war organisation. See Charles E. Neu, *America's Lost War, Vietnam: 1945-1975* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2005), pp. 84 + 100.

[20] Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 146.

[21] Addington, *America's War*, p. 112.

anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian tone in the original novel.[22] Integral to these revisions to Johnson's script is Major Reisman, the unit's commanding officer and the story's central protagonist, who at times, Aldrich complains, resembles a 'scoutmaster' and instead 'has to be the most cynical, suspicious, sophisticated, anti-authoritarian, anti-Establishment, mean, miserable son-of-a-bitch that anyone has ever seen in a movie.'[23] In this way the revised screenplay displayed thematic continuity with the director's previous work, most evidently the Second World War combat film *Attack!*, which is about how army strategy is fatally undermined by the refusal of a corrupt and politically aspirant Colonel (Lee Marvin) to dismiss his platoon's cowardly and hysterical commanding officer, whose powerful and influential father holds the key to his future career. Furthermore, compared to the prevailing right-wing consensus of the mid-1950s, observes Ursini and Sliver, the 'anti-authoritarian bias manifest eleven years earlier in *Attack!* was no longer an uncommon outlook.'[24] Indeed, confounding even Aldrich's expectations, when the film came out the following year this outlook had formed into a 'tidal wave'[25], which was, he later reflected, 'obviously in large part responsible for the success of the picture, over and above its intrinsic entertainment value. Younger people by the bushel thought it was an anti-establishment picture.'[26]

The events of 1968, the year after *The Dirty Dozen*'s release, marked a major turning point in the conflict and further validated the film's anti-establishment stance, and its cynical and subversive attitude towards many of the myths and assumptions traditionally perpetuated by Hollywood war films. On the 31 January 1968, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched the Tet offensive. Despite being successfully

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[22] Williams, *Body and Soul*, p. 251.

[23] Aldrich to Hyman, 28 January 1966.

[24] Silver and Ursini, *What Ever*, p. 125. *Attack!,* Basinger observes, 'is an inversion film of the fourth wave type, but one that appears during the third wave as an example of the undercurrent working against the mainstream.' See Basinger, *The World*, p. 307.

[25] Alain Silver, 'Interview with Robert Aldrich' (1970), in Arnold and Miller (eds.), *Robert Aldrich*, p. 67.

[26] Harry Ringel, 'Up to Date with Robert Aldrich' (1974), in Arnold and Miller (eds.), *Robert Aldrich,* p. 75.

repelled by the South Vietnamese and their American allies, these wave of surprise assaults emphatically contradicted official reports America was winning the war, and dealt a huge psychological blow to the country and its military effort. Shortly after visiting Vietnam in the aftermath of the enemy offensive, Walter Cronkite, CBS's influential newscaster, told nearly 20 million viewers that it 'seemed more than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stale mate.'[27] As well as a conflict that was at odds with the widely held perception of U.S. military supremacy, the media's coverage of widespread drug use and rising crime rates in the army, and atrocities committed by American soldiers, had also began to erode the myth of its moral superiority. In March, shocking news broke of the massacre of between 450 and 500 mostly women, children and old men by American soldiers in the hamlet of My Lai 4, in the Quang Ngai province.[28]

The Tet offensive and the My Lai massacre fueled growing opposition to the war and prompted angry mass protests during a year when it appeared the very fabric of American society was being torn apart. Indeed, the burgeoning anti-war movement became intertwined with other social movements such as Civil Rights, at a time when political assassinations, and widespread conflict and disorder in the nation's cities and on its university campuses, exposed the country's profound social, cultural and political divisions. In turn, the breakdown in law and order and mounting opposition to the war, combined with the accelerated rate of social change and rise of the permissive society, sparked a right-wing backlash amongst the country's so called 'silent majority' that brought Republican Richard Nixon to the White House in November 1968. However, as Paul Monaco notes, although Vietnam proved extremely divisive, 'images of an entire nation divided into two distinct and warring camps are largely exaggerated and

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[27] Quoted in Neu, *America's Lost*, p. 134.
[28] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-present* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 478-9.

inaccurate.'[29] In other words, ambivalence was as widespread as unequivocal support, still more outright opposition. Indeed, Nixon's popular pledge to achieve 'peace with honour' reflected an astute understanding that although ongoing events in Vietnam had caused an increasing number of Americans to question the war and amplified calls for a swift withdrawal, a significant proportion nonetheless wanted the conflict to reach a satisfactory resolution, if need be through the use of force. In the year of his election, for example, a poll indicated that 45 per cent of Americans thought the war was a mistake, yet queried on whether a halt in bombing would hasten the chances for peace in another poll, 71 per cent responded 'no'.[30]

Such polls do not reflect the marked differences in opinion between different demographic groups, but they suggest it would be wrong to assume even the attitudes of cinema's young under-25 year old audience could be neatly categorised. In its pursuit of profit Hollywood, of course, rarely makes such an assumption. The balancing of different elements to achieve a level of calculated ambiguity is often the principal aim, which, it is intended, will enable a film to accommodate a range of different tastes and perspectives. To this end, Aldrich recognised that at the same time as anti-establishment sentiment was on the increase, these feelings did not necessarily translate straightforwardly into an anti-war position, especially with regards to the Second World War. Indeed the story's underlying themes and its exploration of the darker side of military life are contained or 'smuggled' within the basic generic framework of a mainstream action-adventure movie, and as a consequence the film cannot really be labelled either pro- or anti-war and is thus open to interpretation. Equally, such an approach allows the viewer, if he so chooses, to focus on the movie's more conventional pleasures and ignore its thematic content more or less altogether. However, whether incorporating subversive qualities into an action-adventure framework ultimately

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[29] Paul Monaco, *The Sixties: 1960-1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 5.
[30] William M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 121.

succeeds in conveying the director's preoccupations to a wider audience than had hitherto been the case, or simply serves to diminish their impact, is a moot point.

Aldrich's strategy of using unusual and disconcerting camera angles, which was a distinctive visual feature of much of his earlier work, is moderated significantly in *The Dirty Dozen*. Correspondingly, in contrast to the anguish and earnestness of *Attack!*, for instance, the film's anarchic humour and comic touches, though supportive of its central themes, are equally indicative of the director's bid for mainstream acceptance. As was his astute understanding that in order to gain the approval of Hyman and MGM, and for it to have a broad audience appeal the film's '"new" morality' and story about 'men who Society have misjudged', must also be tempered with bountiful action. In his memo to Hyman, Aldrich writes:

> When that story is told, Metro will still have a terribly successful war/adventure picture with all the action and excitement that every patron is breathlessly waiting to marvel at, but neither we nor they will be burdened by a picture that glorifies war as war, glorifies hypocrisy, glorifies viciousness...all without reason. This is what I mean by having our cake and eating it.[31]

A decision taken at the production stage that constitutes a striking break from the conventions of Hollywood filmmaking, however, is the near elimination of women from the story. Of the two major female characters in Nunnally Johnson's script, the snobbish English aristocrat Lady Margot Strathallan is a familiar class stereotype from past war films, and was cut over concerns her inclusion might alienate English audiences, in spite of the fact she enhances the anti-establishment theme.[32] The other, Reisman's lover and pub landlady Tessie, was presumably excised because romantic sentiment was

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[31] Aldrich to Hyman, 28 January 1966.
[32] Robert H. O'Brien to Robert Aldrich (letter), 20 May 1965, Box 60, f.7, Aldrich/AFI.

fundamentally at odds with Aldrich's characterisation of the Major as described in his memo to Hyman.[33] In films produced during World War II, romantic relationships such as these also symbolised unity between America and its special ally England, and helped to gloss the tensions and conflicts inherent to Anglo-American relations.[34] Moreover, from the bleak perspective of a group of soldiers languishing in a U.S. military prison facing life sentences or death, and then trained under armed guard, geographical location or special relationships are of little consequence. As such, England, the setting for the majority of the film, remains relatively anonymous. For many U.S. soldiers stationed abroad sexual gratification took precedence over finding romance, which more often than not was paid for; taboo behaviour that flies in the face of the wholesome images and resonant symbolism Hollywood projected in 1940s war films. Indeed, in keeping with Aldrich's revisionist stance the film's first scene with women, well over an hour into the film, is at the dozen's 'graduation ball', an end of training party Reisman organises for his men with a group of English prostitutes. Again, whether this scene and the general absence of women from the story is a corrective to past films and provoked viewers to think critically about the nature of war and its representation, or played more to the misogynistic impulses of the film's predominantly young male audience, is an area of contention.[35]

Along with certain revisions to Johnson's screenplay, Aldrich also insisted on cast approval. However, much to his consternation the director discovered Reisman, a part he wanted Lee Marvin to play, had been offered to John Wayne without his knowledge or consent: 'I'm a Wayne fan. His politics don't bother me, that's his mother's problem.

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[33]Aldrich to Hyman, 28 January 1966. See also Nunnally Johnson, 'The Dirty Dozen' (unpublished screenplay), 23 September 1965, Script Collection, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California.

[34] See *A Yank in the RAF* (1941), *International Squadron* (1941), and *Eagle Squadron* (1942), for example. See also David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: American Occupation of Britain 1942-45* (London: HarperCollins, 1995).

[35] Contrary to the claim Johnson's perspective was dated, there were also a number of other changes that indicate Aldrich considered certain narrative and character elements, in both the book and original screenplay, too complex or uncompromising for mainstream tastes. These will be noted in the following section.

But not Wayne for a Marvin part.'[36] Wayne's courage and noble individualism, Aldrich recognised, was inappropriate for the film's leading protagonist. His association with iconic Second World War films, furthermore, would have conflicted with the subversiveness of the director's vision. Indeed, after thousands of men who fought in Vietnam discovered the reality of the conflict was far removed from the depiction of armed combat in classic Hollywood war movies, as one historian notes, the veteran actor 'had become a soldier's joke, an anti-hero, an example of how not to fight a war.'[37] Wayne, in any case, was not impressed by the screenplay and turned down the opportunity to star in the film, preferring to focus on making the unambiguously pro-war *The Green Berets*. 'I have the premonition that whoever wrote this,' stated Wayne in a letter to MGM, 'if still in school, would be wearing sandals and carrying signs against the war in Vietnam, and would have an utter lack of respect for the men who fight their battles for them.'[38]

Lee Marvin's abrasive, anti-heroic qualities, by comparison, as Aldrich recognised, were ideally suited to the character of Reisman. He was also becoming increasingly bankable star, winning the Best Actor Oscar for *Cat Ballou* (1965), which allayed MGM's fears he was not a big enough box office draw to play the lead role in the film. Marvin, unlike Wayne, moreover, had served as a marine during the Second World War. Involved in 21 beachhead landings in the Pacific theatre, he earned a Purple Heart and received an injury that would hospitalise him for over a year; military experience that brings authenticity to his performance.[39] Echoing Aldrich's defense of the film's climactic sequence that involves the mass incineration of a large group of German officers and their wives[40], Marvin opined: 'Life is a violent situation. Let's not kid

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[36] Quoted in Arnold and Miller, *The Films*, p. 125.
[37] Quoted in Neu, *America's Lost*, p. 110.
[38] John Wayne to Kenneth Hyman (copied letter), Box 59, f.7, Aldrich/AFI.
[39] '*Playboy* Interview: Lee Marvin', *Playboy*, January 1969, p. 59.
[40] Aldrich contended comparable violence has been depicted in Hollywood and non-American films over the years 'without any complaints from the American critics.' See Windeler, 'Aldrich'.

ourselves about that. It's not just the men in the chalet who were Nazis; the women were part of it too.... We glorify the 8th Air Force for bombing cities when they killed 100,000 people in one night, but remember, they were a lot of women and children burned up in those raids.'[41] The other actors making up the cast consisted of some established character actors, many of whom had worked with Aldrich before, such as Ernest Borgnine, Richard Jaeckel, Ralph Meeker and George Kennedy, and others who would become stars in their own right in the following decade - Donald Sutherland, Charles Bronson and Telly Savalas. The film also features the black American football star Jim Brown in his second movie role. The maverick actor/director John Cassevetes, who plays Private Franko in the film, received an Oscar nomination for Best Actor in a Supporting Role.

Fighting for freedom

The close analysis of *The Dirty Dozen* will elaborate upon many of the critical observations made in the preceding section, with further reference to the social and cultural context of the film's release. These critical insights and contextual factors, in addition, will inform the discussion of the text in relation to the history and conventions of the World War II combat film, a popular and enduring generic mode with a familiar core narrative structure: a hero leads a diverse group of men on a dangerous mission to accomplish an important military objective.[42] Since its emergence during the Second World War, the combat film has undergone a series of evolutionary cycles, adapting to the tastes, attitudes and concerns of a particular period. At its basis, however, at least up until the mid 1960s, the combat film's hero/group/objective framework proved extremely effective in systematically working through the key dilemmas and contradictions that attend acts of war and reinforce certain founding myths and ideals;

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[41] Quoted in Arnold and Miller, *The Films*, p. 127.
[42] Basinger, *The World*, pp. 73-74.

namely liberty, equality and unity, the sanctity of the individual and America's moral superiority. In this way, the combat mode served to justify America's involvement in the Second World War, and similarly promulgated the need for a strong military during the Cold War era. Amidst the social turmoil of the second half of the 1960s, however, films such as *The Dirty Dozen*, while maintaining a measure of continuity, at the same time undermined the mythical assumptions and moral distinctions propagated by the combat film by testing or inverting a number of its central characteristics.

This attitude and approach to the genre is signalled in the film's grim opening sequence. Depicting the execution of an American soldier for murder in a U.S. military prison in England, it establishes a central irony of *The Dirty Dozen*, which is that your own side and not solely the opposition forces can be regarded as the 'enemy'. This also prefigures another of the film's other principal themes: the morality of violence. That is, behaviour considered morally reprehensible within civil society, on the battlefield is usually the most effective way of achieving military objectives. As Jeanette Basinger observes, '*The Dirty Dozen* suggests that war needs evil and authoritarian attitudes to succeed.'[43]

Witnessing the hanging of the young private Gardner is Major Reisman, the story's tough and cynical central protagonist and a man who understands and embodies these harsh contradictions. As the hood and noose are placed over the whimpering soldier's head, Reisman, with a stoical expression, looks on impatiently. As the trap-door is opened a brief, jolting upward shot shows Gardner drop to his death. The Major then turns disdainfully to a priest reading from the bible who appears to lack relevancy or

[43] Ibid., p. 205.

purpose, and abruptly leaves for military headquarters, where he has been summoned before his military superiors.[44]

In the grand surroundings of the English mansion that houses U.S. command headquarters we soon learn Reisman is 'not interested in embroidery, only results'. He is also resentful of authority, and only follows the rules book when he has to. However, his persistent insubordination has resulted in a situation where he has little option but to 'volunteer' for a behind the lines operation, 'Project Amnesty', or face an uncertain future. After hearing the outline of the project, Reisman declares it the work of 'a raving lunatic' with little hope of succeeding. Though General Worden appears to be in private agreement, the Colonel is swiftly rebuked by General Denton, an exchange that underscores their mutual contempt. The military brass clearly care little if his men return dead or alive, which contrasts with the steadfast loyalty and responsibility of the officer class typical of more traditional Hollywood war movies. The ultimate fate of the 'deadheads' is of no obvious concern to the Major either, but his own personal survival is, and he asserts he at least needs to be able to 'sell the idea.' The offer of a temporary amnesty to prisoners who, after all, face execution or life in prison, is an inadequate incentive for such a dangerous mission. Worden eventually agrees to consider commuting the men's sentences if they distinguish themselves in the line of duty.

Back at the military prison Reisman's prospective unit is lined up and introduced by name, crime and sentence. They are ethnically mixed group and we learn that the circumstances surrounding their crimes vary greatly. Some are guilty, others are not.

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[44] Matheson describes how Gardner's characterisation in the film is far more sympathetic than the original source novel, and is a key example of how the story's screen adaptation targets young doves opposed to and fearful of the draft in the year of the film's release. In the book the reader learns he has murdered his girlfriend and is 'unconcerned with social ideals and unamenable to social control', Matheson writes. Whereas in the film, by contrast, we learn nothing of his nature or his crimes, and during his execution he 'looks like a lamb to the slaughter.' Furthermore, playing on contemporary generational conflict, this takes place in the presence of a group of middle-aged army officials. See Sue Matheson, 'Individualism, Bentham's Panopticon, and Counterculture in *the Dirty Dozen*', *Journal of Popular Film and Television,* vol. 36, no. 4 (2009), p. 182.

Maggot (Telly Savalas), for instance, a devoutly religious and virulently racist Southerner prone to bouts of demented laughter, is awaiting execution for raping and beating a woman to death. 'I can see you have a sense of humour,' Reisman sardonically remarks, 'the All-American hero, laughing in the face of death.' The Polish-American Wladislaw (Charles Bronson), by contrast, was convicted of shooting an officer carrying his unit's entire medical supply as he attempted to flee an enemy attack. The only crime Wladislaw committed, Reisman wryly observes, is 'you let somebody see you do it'. Similarly, Jefferson (Jim Brown), the African American recruit, the Major agrees, 'had considerable justification' for killing the racist thugs who were attempting to castrate him. This is a view the military establishment clearly did not share, however, which in the context of a war with an avowedly racist antagonist in Nazi Germany casts Jefferson's death sentence in an decidedly ironic light.

Traditionally, difference across the infantry unit is a key convention of the World War II combat film, and insofar as the unit is multi-ethnic and the men hail from different parts of America, *The Dirty Dozen* conforms to generic type. Its relationship with the other sub-categories of difference which, as Basinger notes, are 'age, background, experience, attitude and willingness to fight,' is, however, more complicated.[45]

From *Bataan* (1943), the combat mode's 'seminal film', through to its fourth cycle in the 1960s, these group differences served fundamentally similar moral and ideological ends.[46] They functioned to represent a cross section of American society, or the constituent 'ingredients' of the country's melting pot, and at the same time assert that U.S. society, in accordance with the country's founding myths, upholds the cherished belief in the individual. Over the course of the narrative, however, individual differences are also manifested in the contrast between men's strengths and their weaknesses

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[45] Basinger, *The World*, p. 51.
[46] Ibid., p. 30

(bravery versus cowardice, for instance), or as a source of internal conflicts (the conflict between the hero and the cynic, for example). Yet when the group is faced with an external threat, conflicts are transcended and individual weaknesses overcome as they unify behind a common cause by fighting to achieve their objective, and in the process, deaths and casualties notwithstanding, prove themselves to be greater than the sum of their parts.

The Dirty Dozen's unconventional attitude towards a number of the combat film's established characteristics, by comparison, are indicative of its responsiveness to contemporary realities as they pertained to the Vietnam War and the wider issues with which the conflict was intertwined. Firstly, in spite of the ethnic/geographic composition of Reisman's unit, there are no obvious social or generational differences; they are all young and working class. Christian Appy estimates 80 percent of the 2.5 million enlisted men who served during the conflict came from working class or poor backgrounds. 'Vietnam', he states, 'more than any other American war in the twentieth century, perhaps in our history, was a working class war.'[47] Secondly, almost all we learn about each of the dozen, in terms of their personal experiences of war or otherwise, is the nature of their crimes, which demonstrates that they all have a natural proclivity for violence, but that this 'willingness to fight' is not necessarily always directed against the 'official' enemy. As we shall see, however, though the men's social status coupled with their criminality makes them natural adversaries of the military establishment, this also forms the basis of a group identity and sense of unity that Reisman, through a combination of cynicism, empathy and hard edged authority, is able to foster and exploit to achieve the set objectives.

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[47] Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 6.

Similar to the function of the group differences described by Basinger, Kathryn Kane demonstrates how the moral and ideological justification for America's involvement in World War II in classic combat films is also achieved by the working through or 'testing' of a set of 'group values': Freedom, The Home, Honour, Cooperation and Duty.[48] 'Freedom', for instance, 'is primarily exemplified by the ostensible, unquestioning equality of the group, the religious and racial, and to a lesser extent, the class tolerance embodied there.'[49] Again, to a viewer with an accumulated knowledge of the genre, most of these values are conspicuous by their absence, inversion or the manner in which they are undercut in *The Dirty Dozen*. We learn nothing about the men's family lives or relationships for 'The Home' as a value to apply, for instance, which is indicative of the de-personalised nature of mass conflict. Likewise, the mass killing of unarmed German officers strongly contends that honour is an abstract ideal and in short supply on the battlefield. Moreover, the traditional dichotomy of values and traits between the Americans and their enemies that in the same way validates U.S. military involvement is subverted in Aldrich's film. Fanaticism and racial intolerance, for example, are bound up in Maggot's stereotyped characteristation, who is portrayed as being as much a hostage to the false authority of God as he is to his warped, bigoted nature.

Cooperation is the only value in evidence from Kane's taxonomy, but only as a corollary of the unit's overriding group value: personal survival. For Reisman survival has become second nature and demands that he is as brutal and uncaring as the military bureaucracy he and his men despise. Indeed, within minutes of meeting his criminal charges he subdues Franko, the least compliant and most pugnacious member of the group, by kicking him unconscious. The men's instinct for aggression is a valuable asset in armed conflict, but must become a conditioned response to the enemy, not their

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[48] Kathryn Kane, *Visions of War: Hollywood Combat Films of World War II*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 16.
[49] Ibid., p. 17.

commanding officer.[50] After all the men have opted to 'co-operate' rather than face their death sentences or life imprisonment, the Major demonstrates survival is also imperative in laying the foundations of an effective team mentality, warning them that if any one of them 'foul up' in training, 'all will back here for immediate execution of sentence,' and 'foul up in combat' and 'I will personally blow your brains out.' In contrast to the noble convictions that compel men to fight in combat films from the past, the dozen are thus forced to choose between two harsh and unsatisfactory options, a predicament with particular resonance for many young males confronted with the hugely unpopular draft system introduced during the Vietnam War.

During the first quarter of the film, in the U.S. military prison, Aldrich's repeated use of overhead or high angle shots reinforces the narrative's underlying determinism and emphasises the men's lowly status. On arriving at the rural location where the men will be trained, however, a series of ground level shots through blades of grass, followed by a montage of the unit constructing their compound, many from a low angle, signal the beginning of an upward trajectory. In keeping with the director's tendency to elicit hope not matter how grim the prospects, this subtle contrast in camera strategies reflects the belief that given the right circumstances, no man is beyond rehabilitation.

During the six week training period the group demonstrate a determination not to breach Reisman's conditions. This is exemplified when Wladislaw and Jefferson knock Franko unconscious after they catch him attempting to break out of the compound. Yet, despite this collective resolve, the Major and his uncompromising approach is apparently a considerable source of animosity amongst the men. However, aside from Franko, this is not particularly evident from their behaviour as they appear too amenable to entirely convince as a group of convicted criminals. Nevertheless, the Army Psychologist asserts to Reisman: 'These guys think the United States army is their enemy, not the Germans',

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[50] Silver and Ursini, *What Ever*, p. 128.

warning him that ‘when the time comes you are liable to be their number one enemy.’ Yet, as the Major recognises, it is not simply the conditions he laid out that are integral to them functioning as a team, but also the feelings of ill-will towards him because of what he represents: ‘Well at least that gives them something in common, and right now that’s what’s missing,’ he replies. Reisman’s remarks can be read as pertaining to growing disquiet amongst U.S. commanding officers in Vietnam as they increasingly became the target of attacks from their own subordinates as the war was escalated and morale went into steep decline.

‘Finally, by 1969-70’, Appy observes, ‘officers were fully aware that authoritarian rule posed the ultimate risk: their own men might kill them.’ In 1971 the army reported 333 such fatal attacks, or ‘fraggings’, was over two and half times the 1969 figure.[51] Including Franko’s attack on Reisman at the military prison, he offers to kill him on two other occasions, once during training and again at their pre-mission meal.[52] Also, in the final scene, after an unwelcome visit from Worden and Denton who commend Wladislaw, Reisman and Bowren, the group’s only three surviving members, on the mission’s success, Wladislaw remarks to the other two: ‘Boy oh boy oh boy, killing generals could get to be a habit with me.’

The seeds of collective rebellion are sown following the group’s refusal to continue shaving using cold water. The protest is instigated by Franko, and the other soldiers quickly unify behind him. ‘Shaving with cold water ain’t gonna make us better

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[51] Appy, *Working-Class*, p. 246.

[52] Stempel notes the shooting script excises a number of the harsher ironies of the Johnson draft, particularly those involving Franko, and as a result the film ends up as a far more conventional combat film than it could have been. He points out Franko’s efforts to get some of the other men to help him kill Reisman during shooting practice has been cut, as well as his attempt to kill the Major during the attack on the Chateau. In addition, the American Rangers attack on the remainder of the unit as they try to escape in a German armoured vehicle, is also cut by Heller. ‘In Johnson’s script’, Stempel writes, ‘the attack shows that the men are not really different from what they were before - some heroes, some villains. In the film, all the members of the unit have become traditional war picture heroes.‘ This reading is, however, problematised by the incineration of the Germans, which is not in Nathanson’s script. See Tom Stempel, *Screenwriter: The Life and Times of Nunnally Johnson* (San Diego: A.S. Barnes, 1980), p. 185.

soldiers,' concurs Wladislaw. Rather than concede to their demands, Reisman sees this as a prime opportunity to turn the screw: 'So you all want to stink.....no further issue of shaving equipment or soap, or hot meals....courtesy of Mr. Franko.' The punishment imposed on the men has the effect of reducing them to animals. However, despite now appearing dirty, unshaven and unkempt and displaying none of the outward signs of rigorous military self discipline, they have formed a distinctive group identity that is principled, proud and defiant. Indeed, as they gradually lose their individual identities, which are associated with their deviant and irresponsible natures, they begin to refer to themselves as a collective 'we' and learn a sense of responsibility to one another, ironically a transition in which the unit's most conspicuous individualist has played a pivotal role. Moreover, the men's appearance, as Matheson notes, is an important signifier of class in the film, and 'Reisman's unwashed and unshaven, illiterate, working-class "slobs"' can be read as representing the disproportionately large number of men from disadvantaged backgrounds who served during the Vietnam War.[53] This observation lends credence to the contradictory remarks of Sergeant Bowren who despite dubbing them 'the dirty dozen', nevertheless tells them 'you look just like real soldiers.' As their hair grows out Matheson also argues the unit's 'image' has a 'countercultural' resonance: 'Having begun their training, Reisman's wards, who "by definition are incapable of taking any discipline or authority," begin to look like hippies.'[54] However, the socio-cultural connotations of the men's appearance is misleading, as Lowry argues, merely reflecting 'the illusion of individualism that permits men to be manipulated into 'rebellious' acts which reinforce authoritarian control.'[55]

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[53] Matheson, 'Individualism', p. 185.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ed Lowry, 'The Dirty Dozen', *Cinema Texas*, vol. 10, no. 4 (Apr 1976), p. 48. Also see Matheson, 'Individualism'.

The unit have an opportunity to prove that they are a cohesive and proficient fighting unit in the pre-mission war games with Colonel Breed's platoon. Moreover, the circumstances surrounding this exercise allows Reisman to make a similar transition of his own. Through his long standing enmity with the vainglorious spit and polish West Point educated Breed, the Major displays a contempt for authority and the military establishment with which his subordinates can readily identify, and, as such, the Major's own authority paradoxically acquires a certain legitimacy in the eyes of his rebellious soldiers. This shared antipathy and new-found respect enables Reisman to instil an important common sense of purpose in his charges for their upcoming mission.

Hostilities between the two men are re-ignited when Reisman's unit arrive for parachute training and are greeted by a full military band and Breed's top platoon. In an effort to protect the secrecy of their mission, Reisman falsely informs his superior officer that the General overseeing the mission is travelling incognito with his men, and leads the stupid and dishevelled Pinkley (Donald Sutherland) out to inspect Breed's men, much to the amusement of the rest of the dozen and presumably many in the audience. 'They look pretty, but can they fight?' inquires the fraudulent General. Breed eventually realises this is a ruse and takes Reisman aside to inform him that '[I]'m going to make it my business to run you right out of this army.' This first involves discovering the nature of the Major's mission and, resorting to strong arm tactics, two of Breed's men unsuccessfully attempt to extract the relevant information from Wladislaw. Initially the dozen are convinced this is an underhand tactic of Reisman aimed at testing their commitment, re-affirming the underlying implication in the film that little moral distinction can be made between the corrupt authority and inhumane practices of the American military and the fascist enemy. 'Trust your major? I'd rather trust Hitler,' states Franko. This suspicion is dispelled, however, when Breed and his armed platoon pay an unannounced visit to their camp the following day and once again attempt to coerce the men into divulging the truth about their mission. The Colonel's belligerence

eventually sparks a brawl, which comes to an abrupt end when Reisman enters the melee firing from a sub machine gun, forcing his superior officer to surrender.

But although Breed loses the battle, he intends to win the war, and reports Reisman's insubordination and his men's lack of discipline to Denton and Worden. The most serious breach of army regulations, however, was the party in the barracks the Major organised, replete with alcohol and women, to reward his men for completing training.[56] With the Project Amnesty now in jeopardy, the Major reasons with his superiors that if they are going to execute his men's sentences for this transgression 'you'd have to lock-up half the United States Army, officers included', and demands they give unit a chance to demonstrate what they are capable of.

This they achieve emphatically, albeit with implausible ease, in the war games with Breed's platoon. By changing the colours of their arm bands, hijacking a military ambulance and dispatching their referee down a country lane they capture Breed's headquarters in a fashion that makes a comic mockery of military convention, and epitomises the strict discipline and pragmatic disregard for the 'rules' of their commanding officer.

The men's faith in their leader and adherence to his philosophy of war is underscored on the eve of their mission in a scene composed to resemble Leonardo Da Vinci's 'The Last Supper,' depicting the twelve disciples arranged in row along a table with the Major in the middle. It also foretells the men's suffering and self sacrifice, and invests their mission with redemptive meaning. The implication of this is that by putting themselves in mortal danger to fight the 'good war' against the evils of fascism they

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[56] In contrast to the 'unsavoury and graphically detailed gangbang' in Nathanson's book, the party scene in the film, modified to boost audience empathy amongst younger members of the audience, depicts 'the eleven men in the awkward manner of high school students asking their classmates for a dance.' See Matheson, 'Individualism', p. 182.

will atone for their past sins. The film, of course, blurs this distinction, and religion is a thematic device deployed to undermine the notion that acts of war can be considered inherently virtuous. Maggot, a crude caricature of Southern piety, is the explicit embodiment of this self deception, who believes when he murders a ‘sinful‘ women he is merely carrying out God’s will. As such, the dozen’s ‘Last Supper’ is profoundly ironic. The men are the ‘chosen ones’ because, as Reisman remarks to Captain Kinder, he ‘can’t think of a better way to fight a war’ than with ‘a bunch of psychopaths.’ In other words, the dozen have been commandeered to carry out the will of the U.S. military establishment because they have an instinct for violence untrammelled by questions of morality.

After the meal, they go over a rhyme Reisman has taught them by rote designed to enable them to memorise the carefully planned assault (‘One - At the roadblock we’ve just begun. Two - The guards are through’, and so on). Intoning the sixteen part sequence in unison as Franko and Pinkley goof around, the group’s final preparations, like the war games against Colonel Breed’s platoon, are more akin to school yard game than the preparations for a ‘suicidal’ attack on a military target, lending the scene an incongruous and disquieting naivete. On the plane over France, as the dozen approach the drop zone, the rhyme is repeated one last time with contrasting solemnity and assumes a more deterministic quality. Disciplined and obedient the men are imbued with a childlike vulnerability and innocence that belies their criminal pasts; Reisman’s tough training regime has conditioned them to control and channel their ‘individual’ impulses and establish an unquestioning acceptance of his authority. And, indeed, of their probable fate. With few of them likely to return alive, the murderous nature of the men’s mission will be lost to history; a roll call over the final credits, the obligatory commendation for heroic sacrifice in the line of duty, functions to safeguard the clear conscience and stand as an enduring memory of the ‘just war’. In 1967, however, this ending may have been viewed ironically or disdainfully, as the discrepancy between the

censored official reports from Vietnam and the brutal realities of the armed conflict were becoming increasingly apparent to the American public.

Whilst the the dozen's assault on the French Chateau delivers the type of exciting action that is major attraction of the war film, the viciousness and brutality with which they achieve their objective is at odds with generic expectations. A catalyst for much of the action and another recurrent convention of the genre is when the unit's plans goes awry. This occurs after Maggot, revealing himself as the Judas Iscariot of Reisman's twelve apostles, murders a young German woman in her room and fires his machine gun, alerting the gathered military brass and their ladies that the chateau has been infiltrated and they are under attack. Panic stricken, the headquarter's occupants take refuge in the building's basement, only to be locked in by Reisman. To a member of the unit rounding up any remaining officers the Major coldly commands '[F]eed the French and kill the Germans', which injects some macabre humour into the situation. Soon the assault has become the 'turkey shoot' he had envisaged as he orders his men to throw grenades and pour gasoline down the ventilation shafts outside. Disconcerting upward shots from below underscore the helpless desperation of the trapped Germans, as they scream and attempt to prise the grenades from the metal grating above. Of course to the Major these methods are of little consequence if they achieve the desired results. But in generic terms his stratagem is of far greater significance, challenging the myth of American moral superiority historically propagated by the Hollywood combat film and the received wisdom that war is a noble endeavour. The callousness of the dozen's actions is registered momentarily by Sergeant Bowren's disbelief at Reisman's orders. That the incineration of the trapped Germans both paradoxically connotes the gas chambers used by the Nazis in the mass extermination of Jews and members of other persecuted groups, and, contemporaneously, bears an uncomfortable parallel with the U.S. military's controversial and indiscriminate use of napalm in Vietnam, underscores Aldrich's subversive intent. A signal shot of Reisman and Wladislaw, who are disguised

as German officers, alongside a life-size bust of Hitler, reinforces the Holocaust connotations of the mass killing and the betrayal of the liberal values the U.S. military purports to defend. Now the men are loyal to their 'fuhrer', Franko's remarks about Reisman's untrustworthiness following the training camp assault on Wladislaw retrospectively assumes an ironic and disturbing significance.

However, although the director deploys various narrative and symbolic devices to break the 'rules' of the war film and highlight the ambiguity of violence, it is arguable the spectacular action of the chateau assault and the viewer's allegiance to the dozen undermines this subtext. Indeed, the accelerated editing and inherent tension of these sequences as the unit prosecute their plan successfully and then attempt to escape as the Nazis begin to mount an aggressive counter-attack killing all but three of the unit, is firmly aimed at evoking the type of strong visceral reactions that may act as a serious impediment to any sort of critical reflection on the viewer's own complicity in these brutal actions. Moreover, although the unit's tactics, like their past crimes, may be considered morally reprehensible, the men are essentially sympathetic, as they are variously endowed with rugged charm, good looks and physical toughness by the actors that play them. As such, we are firmly aligned with the twelve disparate individuals as they are transformed in to a crack combat team and implicitly achieve martyrdom at the film's climax. Thus, with the exception of Maggot, the men's brave and exciting exploits in the face of such overwhelming odds, as Arnold and Miller writes, means '[T]hey die not as criminals but as heroes.'[57] In spite of the compelling qualities of character and action, however, the irony of this inversion may remain self-evident to the more reflective in the audience. The deaths of eleven of Reisman's convict recruits is also somewhat ambiguous. Though ostensibly the high body count can be read simply as underscoring the exploitation and expendability of men in war, or indeed a reflection of the 'impossibility' of the mission, a more cynical viewer may instead interpret this as a

[57] Arnold and Miller, *The Films*, p. 132.

narrative punishment typically meted out to moral transgressors in Hollywood film and an indication of the film's inherent conservatism. In other words, it reassures the audience that despite their courageous acts these men have nonetheless been convicted of serious crimes and justice would not have been served if they were allowed to survive and return to civil society.

The representation of the Germans is also open to interpretation. Historically, Nazi characters in popular war films had been stereotyped as as 'the cold, brutal and efficient and almost invincible sadist', writes Hans Christoph Kayser, or more recently in *The Longest Day*, for example, as the slightly more human 'brutal but ineffectual buffoon.'[58] In *The Dirty Dozen*, by contrast, the Germans are neither caricatures nor fully articulated characters and as such are fairly anonymous. In other words, while avoiding the dichotomous characterisations of earlier war films, it falls short of debunking these entrenched stereotypes. On the other hand, the facelessness of the German high command invests it with symbolic meaning as an abstraction that mirrors their U.S. counterparts. As such, this mirroring incites the dozen's '"transference" of anger and hostility'[59], as Aldrich puts it, and challenges the moral distinctions the war film traditionally reinforces. Indeed, note Arnold and Miller, '[T]he American officers who devise the plan command from an ornate, decadent mansion in England, one which is visually linked with the French Chateau which houses the Germans. By destroying this chateau and killing the German officers within, the Dozen are metaphorically killing the Allied officers as well.'[60] Likewise, the manner of the officers' deaths, trapped within the cellar of their headquarters, echoes the prior circumstances of Reisman's criminal recruits, adding a note of poetic justice to the film's climax.

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[58] Hans Christoph Kayser, 'The Sadist and the Clown — the Changing Nazi Image in the American Media', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 10, no. 4, p. 848.
[59] Aldrich to Hyman, 28 January 1966.
[60] Arnold and Miller, *The Films*, p. 126.

Defusing the meaning

MGM's major advertising and marketing campaign for *The Dirty Dozen* was broad in scope but with a strong emphasis on attracting the mainstream young, male cinemagoer. This is evident from its two prong campaign strategy which, alongside targeting many of the major newspapers and magazines with adverts, editorial breaks and interviews, placed full page colour adverts in eight major national men's magazines: young sophisticate publications (*Esquire* and *Playboy*), sports magazines (*Sports* and *Sports Illustrated*), action journals (*True* and *Argosy*), but also veteran's publications (*American Legion* and *VFW*). The film was covered more widely in the sports press, and attracted special attention in African American publications, such as *Ebony*, because it featured former American football star Jim Brown in his first major screen role.[61] Furthermore, as well as bringing out a paperback edition of E. M. Nathanson's best selling novel to coincide with the release of the film, an illustrated 'pre-sell' comic book was also published.[62]

The imagery for the campaign, painted by the artist Frank McCarthy, advertised *The Dirty Dozen*'s exciting action and actor/heroes, and was generic to the mainstream action films aimed at attracting the lucrative young, male audience segment during the 1960s (see Figure 3.2). McCarthy's other work included *The Great Escape* (1963) and *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969), amongst others.

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[61] Brown's refusal to return to training with his team the Cleveland Browns due to delays in filming, and his subsequent retirement from the sport, generated considerable publicity for the film in the American press.

[62] Dan S. Terrell (memo), 13 April 1967, Box 61, f.5, Aldrich/AFI.

Fig 3.2 Promotional poster

However, it is evident from a preliminary sketch produced in early 1966 (see Figure 3.3) that Aldrich was keen on a far more unconventional and provocative promotional strategy, which would have excited considerable controversy and curiosity, as well as directly tapping into the anti-establishment sentiment that was on the rise amongst some sections of the younger population.[63] This bold and simple design, with its horizontal lines of barbed wire in the foreground and a canton containing the film's title, is a subversive take on America's most iconic national flag, the 'stars and stripes'. In the bottom quarter a line of silhouetted soldiers run diagonally from left to right in perspective, above a tag-line that reads: 'The Picture that the Army Refused to be Shown!'. That the men depicted are depersonalised and thus are themselves not shown supports Ursini and Silver's observation that because 'the viewer learns very little else

[63] Poster sketch, Box 60, f.9, Aldrich/AFI.

about these characters' backgrounds during the film except for their crimes', they are nothing more than an 'abstraction.'[64] As such, these anonymous soldiers are an affront to the mythic individualism traditionally affirmed by the Hollywood combat film. Indeed, the film's grim determinism is emphasised by having the men dwarfed beneath the flag and behind barbed wire which at once denotes their incarceration and conditioning, as well as the 'maniacal' nature of the military operation they are compelled to undertake. Channelling the growing disillusionment over Vietnam, the men are portrayed as the expendable instruments of America's moral failure.

Fig 3.3 Sketched idea for promotional poster (Robert Aldrich collection, AFI)

However, *The Dirty Dozen* is ambivalent about war, or, in other words, conforms to Hollywood commercial practice by having it both ways. The 'stars and stripes' design is

[64] Ursini and Silver, *What Ever*, p. 128.

too partisan for a film that attempts to be ideologically neutral and would likely have misled many cinemagoers, and certainly alienated many of those not opposed to Vietnam. Indeed, in the late 1960s, such subversive statements were of significant political import and associated with the anti-war movement. At the Woodstock festival in 1969, for example, during a period when political opinion over the Vietnam War was at its most polarised, Jimi Hendrix courted controversy by performing his derisive rendition of the American national anthem 'The Star-Spangled Banner' using distortion effects and feedback to mimic the sound of screams, planes and bombs. In any case, as Aldrich later discovered, the 'stars and stripes' concept could not be used because it was prohibited by federal and state law.[65]

McCarthy's design, by contrast, employs the tried and tested formula of male action genre advertising, with its images of spectacular action, and emphasis on heroicising the film's protagonists. On the poster there is a cluster of smaller images made up predominantly of 'snap-shots' of the chateau assault, above which tower various members of the dozen, machine guns blazing. Compared to the abstract conception of the earlier design, they are presented as a distinct group of individuals. At least two are recognisable as the actors who play them (Lee Marvin and Charles Bronson). Moreover, they are brave, aggressive and masterful, or, literally and figuratively speaking, larger than life, all qualities that promote audience identification. An image of men and women lustfully embracing at the pre-mission party, which, incidentally, bears little relation to the rather courteous and well mannered encounter depicted in the film, signals the dozen's attractiveness and virility, two further pre-requisites for young male fans of the genre. There is little indication they lack agency, except perhaps for the third person emphasis in the tag line: 'Train them! Excite them! Arm them!... Then Turn them Loose on the Nazis!'. Equally, the promotional image contains nothing to signify the film's underlying anti-authoritarian theme, but does convey something of its

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[65] Kenneth Hyman to Robert Aldrich (fax), Box 60, f.9, Aldrich/AFI.

uncompromising brutality by including images of Posey wielding a knife and being disarmed by Reisman during training. Moreover, Lee Marvin's wilful and abrasive screen persona helps form the expectation the film is cynical and unconventional. Yet, the overall impression is of an intellectually undemanding, action packed Second World War combat film which, in essence, affirms the moral dichotomy between the Allies and the Nazis firmly embedded in the genre. However, although this summation is at least partially honest, as the textual analysis and reception demonstrate, it nonetheless constructs an incomplete picture that belies the film's underlying thematic complexity, even if this is often not clearly evident. As a seasoned and experienced player in Hollywood Aldrich would have appreciated the industry was first and foremost about selling entertainment and that it was commercially imperative the visual shorthand of film advertising is utilised to assert such qualities. Yet judging from the earlier design, and a letter to Kenneth Hyman a short time before the film's release, evidently he had greater aspirations for *The Dirty Dozen*. 'I think the ads stink', the director complained. 'I think they are tasteless, unimpressive, unimaginative and most of all CHEAP. They make DOZEN look like an every day adventure war picture made by Universal for a million. They just don't have any class.'[66]

Although *The Dirty Dozen* was a major box office hit it provoked a wide range of conflicting responses in the U.S. media, a discrepancy which can be explained by examining a number of interrelated textual and contextual factors. As has been discussed, a significant source of critical difference across a range of different newspaper and magazine publications derived from the film's ambivalence, or how it attempts to reconcile generic expectations with any anti-authoritarian sentiment. Thus, responses in the high brow and middle brow press ranged from criticism for the way the film contradicts these themes with dramatic action cynically aimed at arousing the atavistic impulses of the cinemagoer, to praise for how it transcends its genre and makes

[66] Robert Aldrich to Kenneth Hyman (letter), 20 January 1967, Box 60, f.9, Aldrich/AFI.

a pertinent comment on authoritarianism and the nature of war. Still others, mainly writing in the mainstream and low brow publications, focussed on 'entertainment value', and expressed neither moral disdain nor commented on any underlying meaning. Only a small proportion of critics linked the popularity of Aldrich's revisionist Second World War film to the contemporary context, namely an increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam and growing social unrest and division at home. Likewise, few commentators made the connection between the incineration of the Nazis and the mass murder of Jews in concentration camps during the Second World War.[67]

The discrepancy between the box office success of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967, $23 million in domestic rentals), another violent, anti-establishment film released a few months after *The Dirty Dozen*, and its hostile reception in the nation's press, was even more marked. Yet, unlike Aldrich's war picture, Arthur Penn's revisionist gangster film underwent a critical reappraisal soon after its resounding commercial success and a consensus gradually formed around the film, acknowledging it for its aesthetic originality.[68] Heavily influenced by the self-conscious stylistic approach of the French New Wave, and combining comic farce with scenes of shocking violence, as Monaco notes, it was 'a cultural turning point in American Cinema.'[69] Observers variously argue the film can be read as a commentary on generational and racial disharmony, America's culture of violence, the allure of celebrity, and the profound disillusionment with the government and the military machine. Pauline Kael, *The New Yorker*'s highly respected film critic and one of the few to initially acclaim Penn's movie, hailed it as a contemporary form of American 'mass art' in a laudatory eight page review.[70] During the 1950s, a decade marked by Cold War paranoia and the nuclear threat, Aldrich had

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[67] Herbert Luft, reviewing the film for a Jewish newspaper, complained that without furnishing the viewer with any historical context concerning Nazi atrocities, the allusions would likely escape the less well informed viewers. See Herbert G. Luft, 'World War II Revoked on Screen', *B'nai B'rith Messenger,* 15 September 1967, 'Dirty Dozen Clips Part II', Aldrich/AFI.

[68] Monaco, *The Sixties*, pp. 184-185.

[69] Ibid., p. 186.

[70] Pauline Kael, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), p. 47.

been held in similar esteem amongst the French *Cahiers* critics for his 'feverish images', notes Thomson. But during the 1960s, '[A]t a time when audiences were supposedly growing more sophisticated [he] vulgarised his style until there is no longer any suggestion that it is his.'[71] Nevertheless, not only did both films expose the gulf in values and attitudes between young cinema goers and many of the nation's middle-aged film critics, *Bonnie and Clyde* and, to a lesser degree, *The Dirty Dozen*, highlighted the fact that many cinemagoers were becoming more cultivated in their taste at the same time as they became increasingly ambivalent about American culture and society, and, as such, the distinctions between 'popular' and 'serious' films could no longer be so clearly delineated.

Out of the unfavourable responses to the *The Dirty Dozen*, some of the most scathing criticism came from *The New York Times*' eminent and influential film critic, Bosley Crowther. In his sustained assault Crowther denounced the film as a 'glorification of a group of criminal soldiers', that is 'astonishingly wanton' and 'encouraging a spirit of hooliganism that is brazenly antisocial.' The 'downright preposterous' notion 'this bunch of felons .....would be committed by any American general to carry out an exceedingly important raid that a regular commando group could do with equal efficiency—and certainly with greater dependability', further precluded the film from any serious consideration.[72] To sections of the low brow press, by contrast, the film was a 'fantasy' that did not warrant such intellectual or moral inquiry, or, indeed, a logical premise. 'If one were a military historian,' wrote Del Carnes in *The Denver Post*, he could nit-pick "The Dirty Dozen" to death. But if the name of the movie game is entertainment (and it is), then one will find this newest war film.... a most rewarding evening out.'[73]

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[71] David Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary of Cinema* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), p. 2.
[72] Bosley Crowther, 'Screen: Brutal Tale of 12 Angry Men; 'Dirty Dozen' Rumbles Into the Capitol', *The New York Times*, June 16 1967, nytimes.com.
[73] Del Carnes, ''Dirty Dozen' Not For Nit-Pickers', *The Denver Post*, date unknown, 'Dirty Dozen Press Clippings Part II', Aldrich/AFI.

With his scholarly style and admiration for European art house films by the likes of Roberto Rossellini and Ingmar Bergman, Crowther, was an elitist cultural commentator whose criticism addressed the middle brow, metropolitan cinemagoer and distinguished him from what he haughtily refers to in his review as 'the easily moved'. *The Times*' critic was also famously disdainful of *Bonnie and Clyde*, writing in the first of three separate reviews, '[T]his blending of farce with brutal killings is as pointless as it is lacking in taste', a persistent stance that contrasted with the critical reversal of some of his contemporaries and, it has been argued, was a significant factor in his replacement in early 1968 after 27 years as the paper's primary film critic.[74] Crowther was judged to be out of touch with America's cinema-going public in his obstinate refusal to acknowledge the cultural and artistic significance of *Bonnie and Clyde*.

The reception of *The Dirty Dozen*, by comparison, was far less contentious and negative criticism was not solely confined to those critics addressing the intellectual elite. In the middle brow *San Francisco Chronicle* Paine Knickerbocker wrote that the film 'muffs an admirably dramatic chance to make a civilized comment on the brutality of war'. This is initially mediated through Lee Marvin's character who is 'an independent thinker' and 'does not hesitate... to state his own hostile feelings about the military.' Yet by the end 'even the audience is encouraged to rub its hands with glee at the barbaric activity of Marvin and the dirty dozen when they attack the peaceful chateau.' Aldrich, she concludes, is thus 'content to please the jackals of the audience. It is probably more profitable to do so.'[75] Indeed, the director concurred, stating the final assault was not a personal decision as such, but necessitated by the imperatives of the film's budget and market expectation. In response to a letter complaining that 'your great film was over

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[74] Bosley Crowther, 'Screen: 'Bonnie and Clyde' Arrives; Careers of Murderers Pictures as Farce', *The New York Times*, 14 August 1967, nytimes.com.
[75] Paine Knickerbocker, 'The Savage Dirty Dozen', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 June 1967, 'Clippings Part I', Aldrich/AFI.

when "The Dirty Dozen" jumped from their transport plane over France', Aldrich wrote; 'I think you are probably right ... about the film being over... But I seriously doubt if the public would support a picture of this cost without an action ending.'[76] Mainstream appeal may have also been the motive behind the film's ending. Indeed, Knickerbocker regarded it as wholly conforming to the familiar pat endings of the genre: 'Those of the dirty dozen who are not killed are honoured in the same sentimental manner that Gary Cooper was in "Lives of the Bengal Lancer"... Aldrich plays it straight, whereas irony at this point would not only have been justifiable, but satisfying.'[77]

John Mahoney writing in the trade press was more equivocal, suggesting that because 'what it attempts to say, if anything, remains elusive', the film potentially could be read both ways. When Wladislaw declares 'killing Generals could get to be a habit with me', the reviewer for *The Hollywood Reporter* ponders: 'Is that line supposed to ring pacifistically?..... Or is the film simply a brutalizing savory for action lovers?'[78] At a time when anti-war sentiment was on the increase it is arguable this type of ambiguity made good commercial sense, and was more profitable than simply targeting the 'jackals' in the audience. Kevin Thomas, a staff writer at the *Los Angeles Times* completes the wide ranging responses in the mainstream, middle brow media, with a review that prefigures subsequent critical analyses, and that argues its diversionary pleasures do not significantly detract from its serious concerns: '"The Dirty Dozen"', writes Thomas, 'is surely one of the most outspoken anti-military, anti-Establishment movies ever to come out of a major studio..... Aldrich has read public sentiment just right. The time of the story may be 1944, but its sentiment is strictly 1967.'[79]

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[76] Robert Aldrich to 'Millie' (letter), 30 June 1967, Box 61, f.7, Aldrich/AFI.

[77] Knickerbocker, 'The Savage'.

[78] John Mahoney, "Dirty Dozen' Should Be One of MGM's Big Moneymakers', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 16 June 1967, *The Dirty Dozen* microfiche, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverley Hills, California.

[79] Kevin Thomas, "Dirty Dozen at Paramount', *Los Angeles Times*, 28 June 1967 [*The Dirty Dozen* microfiche/AMPAS].

Echoing the review of Knickerbocker, but taking issue with Crowther's criticisms, Stephen Farber, a young, liberal intellectual critic writing in *Film Quarterly* begrudged Aldrich's 'manipulative' film a degree of respect as 'one of the most vicious, though one of the craftiest movies I know', in the most insightful, though sometimes inadvertently so, and in-depth analysis of *The Dirty Dozen*.[80] '[T]hey're the most innocent looking, submissive group of ostensibly violent men you'll ever find,' writes Farber of the Dozen, 'Reisman masters them too effortlessly and efficiently.'[81] During a decade when the widely held perception of black passivity had begun to be effaced by Civil Rights, and then vigorously challenged by Black Power, Jefferson's conversion was singled out for particular critical disdain. Moreover, the oppressed black population's lack of enthusiasm for the Second World War, especially against the Japanese, and their heightened awareness and militancy arising from the far reaching social and economic shifts of the period had resonant parallels with late 1960s America. Indeed, outspoken opposition to America's 'race war' in Indochina, as Polenberg notes, meant 'Vietnam served as a crucible in which racial nationalism hardened and congealed.'[82] As such, both Jefferson's initial recalcitrance, and his act of self defense against his 'cracker' assailants and assault upon Maggot for a racist outburst, were consonant with the racial autonomy and retaliatory tactics espoused by black nationalists. Yet the black soldier's blank expression some days later when Franko remonstrates '[W]hat is this? Uncle Tom week?' as he is apprehended trying to escape, signals his total assimilation into Reisman's unit. 'The facility of the Negro's reconciliation to what he calls the white man's war,' states Farber, 'is the clearest indication of the film's cheapness.'[83] That Maggot is later gunned down by Jefferson

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[80] Stephen Farber, 'The Dirty Dozen', *FIlm Quarterly*, vol. xxi, no. 2 (Winter 1967-68), p. 36.
[81] Ibid., pp. 37-38.
[82] Richard Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States since 1938* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 236.
[83] Farber, 'The Dirty', p. 38.

after his arbitrary acts of violence derail the mission and threaten the survival of the group, may have been a token symbolic attempt to offset this inconsistency.

'But the movie is complicated', he goes on to add, pointing to the 'official pomposity' of Colonel Breed. In Breed Aldrich and the film's screenwriters created the dozen's satirical foil and a 'safe target' for the prejudices of the audience; 'a way of titillating this aggressiveness even as they sold their criminals over to respectability.'[84] As such, Farber contests Crowther's criticism of the film for being 'brazenly anti-social': '[T]he point is that it isn't really anti-social at all; it never questions the military ethos or the validity of war, it only taunts certain details of the establishment. The convict's rebelliousness is channelled finally toward a socially estimable goal.'[85]

Ironically, Farber may have also added that the film is more complex than he gives it credit. Indeed, by criticising the chateau assault for 'playing to the sadistic impulses that none of us can ignore,' and because unlike '[G]reat art.... it doesn't ask us to reflect honestly on our vulnerabilities', he exhibits the very critical awareness he accuses the film of failing to foster.[86] This is also implicit in his next statement: '*The Dirty Dozen* is not the first movie to treat its public with contempt. But the film is uncannily, frighteningly in keeping with today's military mentality.' Or, in other words, 'the war being fought in the movie, though it is called World War II, is really the Vietnam War.'[87] This perception is reinforced by the portrayal of the German officers and their ladies in a comparatively neutral light, which deemphasizes the explicit moral signification common to the genre. As such, the critic argues, the film contemporaneously mediates the widespread indifference U.S. soldiers felt towards either the ideological justification for the conflict, which is the containment of communism, or their Vietnamese 'enemy',

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[84] Ibid., p. 38.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., pp. 39-40.
[87] Ibid., p. 40.

of which the distinction between civilian and combatant was often extremely difficult to establish. Thus, macho action and noble sentiments notwithstanding, as *Life*'s Richard Schickel contends, it is possible for 'adults experienced in the ways of Hollywood sappers' to 'defuse' the film's 'moral and aesthetic booby traps', and perhaps even acknowledge, if only retrospectively, its so called contempt for its unthinking audience is a reflection of the establishment's disregard for men who are trained and conditioned to fight unquestioningly.[88] Thus, when this vantage point is arrived at, the film's dialogical relationship with the present may become more apparent and, as Farber observes, '[T]he hideous moral of the war in Vietnam and of *The Dirty Dozen* is that you kill Enemy, and you have a lively time at it, because that is what you are ordered to do; you never much worry about why you're fighting or what's at stake.'[89]

Interestingly, the *Saturday Review*'s Arthur Knight expounded a significantly different take on the 'moral' of *The Dirty Dozen*, further illustrating the film's profound ambivalence and resistance to any attempts at a uniform, coherent reading. '*The Dirty Dozen* plays with a new and curiously timely angle', writes Knight, which is 'authority and men's ambivalent need for and resentment of it', an irony 'which today's audiences will grudgingly appreciate'. The type of authority the film sanctions and Knight approves is not in the 'abstract', but its human personification, a commanding officer 'who learns that.... before he can give orders, he must be prepared to follow them'. In this way, the film taps into an increasingly recurrent theme in late 1960s and early 1970s film - man's struggle against impersonal institutions or faceless big business - yet in a far more contradictory manner and, for this reason, producing a far bleaker outcome than *Bonnie and Clyde*, for example. Thus, although Reisman is constrained to achieve the aims of the military establishment, he at the same time both identifies with and furthermore exploits the existential situation of his men. This is co-operative

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[88] Richard Schickel, 'Harsh Moral from a Grisly Film', *Life*, 21 July 1967 [*The Dirty Dozen* microfiche/ AMPAS].
[89] Farber, 'The Dirty', p. 40.

individualism subsumed by pervasive determinism. However, far from being in any way objectionable to Knight the Major is an acceptable mediation, and the men's complicity in their own subjugation is paradoxically interpreted as an act of free will. The middle-aged reviewer's problematic appraisal appears to be an attempt to reconcile his liberal mindedness with generational concern at the fissuring of American society amidst the social upheaval of the late 1960s: '[I]n an age of non-conformity rampant, the logic of authoritarianism that is understanding, understandable - and right - becomes not only acceptable but welcomed.'[90]

Yet, as Farber, who took exception to Knight's review, contends, there is nothing 'understanding' about Reisman's physical brutalization of Franko, or that can be commended about exploiting men's primitive instincts for bloody and murderous ends.[91] But perhaps this critical perspective was missing the point also, because, as Judith Crist commented in her laudatory review of the film on NBC's 'TV Today Show', 'It is cruel and unpleasant on an intellectual level but that, of course, is war.'[92]

Conclusion

Revising Aldrich's comments in the introduction of this chapter, *The Dirty Dozen* is not so much anti-war, nor is it straightforwardly anti-authoritarian, but performs something of a double inversion, thus making anti-authoritarian authoritarianism a more accurate description. This thematic slant enabled the film to mediate the nexus between the wider social and political conflict of the late sixties, and the controversy surrounding the Vietnam War, yet without subscribing to either a pro- or anti-war viewpoint. Not only did this make sound commercial sense, contrary to the misconception public opinion

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[90] Arthur Knight, 'SR Goes to the Movies: Games Martial and Martial', *Saturday Review*, June 17 1967 [*The Dirty Dozen* microfiche/AMPAS].

[91] Farber, 'The Dirty', p. 40.

[92] Quoted in 'The Dirty Dozen', *Film Facts*, vol. 10, no. 13 (August 1967), 'Dirty Dozen Clippings Part II', Aldrich/AFI.

was deeply divided along generational lines, the film's popularity amongst young male movie goers suggests many had conflicted feelings over America's overseas war and its ideological ends. This overarching interpretation is, however, problematised by the violent action, macho humour and redemptive qualities that enable the viewer to easily ignore its deeper themes, as some reviewers noted. Equally, however, it would be erroneous to judge the vicarious enjoyment of screen violence as a reliable indicator of hawkishness.

Aldrich's film is also significant as the first popular hit of the war film's period of inversion, and as the precursor of three other 'dirty' films - *Devil's Brigade* (1968), *Play Dirty* (1969) and *Kelly's Heroes* (1970) - that shared with it a number of key conventions and expressed a similarly anarchic attitude. The latter picture, a minor hit at the time, was released in a successful and significant year for the war movie, which accounted for four out of the top ten biggest films of the year. Contrasting these releases also broadly highlights the cultural and political differences that came to define the late 1960s and early 1970s. *M*A*S*H** (1970, third highest grosser) and *Catch-22* (1970, ninth) were attuned to the countercultural attitudes of the younger generation. Both contain no combat and are black comedies about the absurdity of war, and although the former is set in military hospital during the Korean War, and the latter on an U.S. Airforce base in Italy during World War II, both, metaphorically speaking, are about Vietnam. The other two, by contrast, satisfied the desire for patriotic narratives of war. *Patton* (fourth), the biopic of the controversial, war-obsessed American General, like *The Dirty Dozen*, was in fact aimed at attracting viewers from both sides of the political divide. Regarded as something of a pantomime villain and a pertinent reminder of the frightening mentality of the U.S. military to the Left, the film also chimed with the right wing backlash against the anti-war movement, reconciling the 'rebel hero' with the

desire for efficient authority.[93] The outsider status of the central protagonist was, however, typical both of 'left' and 'right' films of the late 1960s, blurring the boundaries between the two cycles, and, as such, indicated not only Hollywood's astute commercial rationale but also reflected the ambivalent attitudes of cinemagoers to contemporary events. In this way, *The Dirty Dozen* can be seen as an important pre-cursor of *Patton*. Indeed, though the General's gung-ho patriotism contrasts with the cynical survival instinct of Major Reisman, both are anti-heroes that are at odds with the system, yet nonetheless succeed in achieving its aims.[94] *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (eighth), Fox's $25 million effort to stress the need for military preparedness by highlighting the errors that led up to the attack on Pearl Harbor, was, by comparison, a relative failure. This was principally because it prioritised historical rigour over audience empathy, and arguably because the incompetence of the nation's military leadership in 1941 bore uncomfortable parallels with America's difficult and protracted war in Vietnam.

In America's Bicentennial year, after an absence of half a decade, the war film returned to the nation's movie screens with the box office smash *Midway* (1976). In contrast to *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, this all-star epic and nostalgic palliative to the failure of Vietnam centres on a pivotal battle in World War II; the U.S. airforce's valiant defeat of a Japanese carrier fleet in the Summer of 1942. *The Eagle Has Landed*, *Cross of Iron*, and *A Bridge Too Far* (all 1977), all released the following year, by comparison, registered *The Dirty Dozen*'s enduring influence and the long term impact the events of the late 1960s had upon cultural attitudes. *The Eagle Has Landed* is about an 'impossible' mission led by a disgraced German unit to capture Winston Churchill. The other two are damning indictments of military authority. Like *The Longest Day* (1962), *A Bridge Too Far* is an all-star international epic based on real historical events, but in contrast to the

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[93] Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), see pp. 156-158.

[94] For an in-depth discussion of the 'left' and 'right' cycles of the late sixties, early seventies, and their essential similarities see chapters 9 and 10 of Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

earlier film's triumphal narrative of the D-day landing, it focusses on the debacle resulting from an ill-advised Allied military offensive against the Germans in Holland in 1944. To contrast the two films is also to contrast two distinct periods; the affluent and optimistic early 1960s and President Kennedy's stirring proclamation that the nation is standing 'on the edge of a new frontier', and the deep cultural malaise of the late 1970s, where in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal, and in the grip of a crippling economic decline President Carter declared the nation was suffering from a 'crisis of confidence.'[95] *Cross of Iron*, is about class conflict and the tragic consequences of a cowardly aristocratic officer's corrupt attempt to win a special commendation for bravery, and is significant as one of the the first Hollywood films, along with *The Eagle Has Landed*, to focus on the experiences of the German army. It is also noteworthy as one of the few films that avoids either glorifying war or moralising about it, but succeeds in conveying some sense of the bleak, ugly and despairing nature of human conflict.

With regards to the extent of *The Dirty Dozen*'s long term influence on the combat genre, one critic rightly observed, '[W]hat was controversial in 1967 seems to have become accepted wisdom.'[96] Indeed, from the reemergence of the Vietnam combat film in the late 1970s with *The Deer Hunter* and *The Boys in C Company* (both 1978), amongst others, through popular and notable war pictures such as *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), the institutionalised brutality of military life, and the gritty and shocking reality of armed conflict that was only really alluded to before Aldrich's film, were soon established as central characteristics of the genre.

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[95] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), p. 141.

[96] Matheson, 'Individualism', p. 187.

Chapter 4: 'Remembering the Red Scare': Nostalgia, Star Power and the Hollywood Blacklist in *The Way We Were* (1973)

Hollywood filmmaking during the early to mid 1970s exhibited two contrasting tendencies profoundly influenced by the turbulent and uncertain course of recent history: nostalgic escapism, and the implicit or explicit criticism of American society and its values. Attuned to the tastes, attitudes and beliefs of cinema's largest demographic, the under-25 year old movie-goer, the latter tendency reflected Hollywood's efforts to consolidate in the wake of the late 1960s industry recession. In his overview of 1974, for example, David Cook observes, 'the most striking feature' of the year's releases was 'their acknowledgement of trauma in the American body politic.' '[T]here was in effect a mainstreaming of the late 1960s counterculture', he adds, 'political and social criticism became popular pursuits, traditions were pilloried and norms inverted.'[1] Disaster movies, genre parody or revision, 'comedies of subversion' and paranoid conspiracy films are all cited to support this observation.[2] As the quotation indicates, this 'trauma' can in part be attributed to the social discord of the previous decade: the profound ideological divisions, largely along generational lines, over controversial issues such as race, the Vietnam War and the material interpretation of the American Dream. It pertained equally, moreover, to the concerns of the present: the economic downturn and the Watergate scandal. Yet 1974 also witnessed the continuation of the popular early 1970s nostalgia wave, notes Cook, which has similarly been explained with reference to these recent events and, drawing its influence from studio-era Hollywood, was the preference of older cinemagoers. But this conservative

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[1] David Cook, '1974: Movies and Political Trauma', in Lester D. Friedman (ed.), *American Cinema of the 1970s: Themes and Variations* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 116.

[2] Ibid., p. 117.

aesthetic impulse to return to or seek inspiration from an idealised past, argues Christine Sprengler, had a further ascription; 'the consciousness-raising efforts promoted by the Women's Movement, Gay Rights, Civil Rights, Anti-War and Anti-capitalist groups' from the mid-sixties onwards. This counter-discourse, Sprengler contends, challenged and undermined America's hegemonic norms, or 'white, heterosexual male privilege', so that 'the traditions once upheld by the authority of their institutions had eroded to the point that they seemed all but irretrievable, except perhaps in the mass-mediated imagination.'[3]

What is notable about a number of 'historical films' released around this time is the intermingling of these apparently contradictory currents. The 'historical crime films' *The Godfather: Part II* and *Chinatown* (both 1974), for example, artfully display these dual tendencies, and have become firmly established in the canon of New Hollywood filmmaking. Presenting a cynical view of America and its core values, both make connections between crime and government and are about the corruption of power, yet visually they construct a romanticised version of the past. A film released the year before that displays similar contradictory characteristics, but has enjoyed neither the critical acclaim nor the scholarly attention of the other two films, is Sydney Pollack's *The Way We Were* (1973). Pollack's popular romantic melodrama is nonetheless a significant 'historical film', not least because it was the first overt treatment of the Hollywood blacklist of the late 1940s and 1950s, a controversy that left deep scars on the film industry, but equally because it 'talks about' some of the key social concerns of the early 1970s.[4]

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[3] Christine Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), p. 46.

[4] Ken Loach quoted in James Chapman, *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), p. 1.

Starring Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford, *The Way We Were* is about an unlikely romance between Katie Morosky, a fiery Jewish radical, and Hubbell Gardiner, a handsome and privileged WASP, and the conflict between careers and personal relationships during the Hollywood Red Scare of the late 1940s. Conflict was a feature of the film's production too. According to screenwriter Arthur Laurents, the set was an 'unofficial battleground' with Laurents and Streisand, and Redford and his long-time collaborator director Sydney Pollack on opposing sides, attempting to impose their respective visions upon the film.[5] Crucially, it was the unfavourable response of a test audience that led to the most significant change; Pollack's decision to excise the section showing that a difference of political principles led to the couple's separation. His decision to downplay the political story was furthermore apposite to the film's nostalgic view of the past. The result was a film 'caught half way between strong, serious art and old-fashioned glossy entertainment', as Stephen Farber observed in *The New York Times,* which was derided by many mid-brow and highbrow critics as superficial, muddled, and contradictory, but enjoyed a far more favourable reaction in the nation's mainstream press and went on to become the year's fourth biggest hit.[6] Its box office success, much to Laurents' disappointment, apparently confirmed that the vast majority of cinemagoers were simply not interested in the film's political narrative.[7] 'Streisand and Redford Together!', as the advertising proclaimed, was the principal draw.[8] For many viewers this may have been the case. Yet for the historian, aside from the film's political focus, its significance also derives from the conflicting and complementary textual relationships between its social themes, stylistic strategy, generic conventions and the personae of its two stars, and how these different elements invested the past

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[5] Arthur Laurents, *Original Story By: A Memoir of Broadway and Hollywood* (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 276.

[6] Stephen Farber, 'Time to Stop Playing It Safe', *The New York Times*, 8 November 1973, p. 129. For an example of a negative review see Stanley Kauffmann, 'The Way We Were', *The New Republic*, 10 November 1973, p. 32.

[7] *The Way We Were* documentary, DVD special feature (Michael Arick, Columbia Pictures; US, 1999).

[8] See Fig 1.

with contemporary meaning. Through the in-depth analysis of the production of *The Way We Were*, its textual content and public reception, this chapter aims to explicate this meaning in relation the film's contemporaneous social, cultural, political and industrial context.

The production of a 'political' star vehicle

The Way We Were came into existence as a film treatment written specifically for Streisand, and was commissioned by the independent producer Ray Stark and written by the screenwriter Arthur Laurents.[9] Stark had helped propel Streisand to superstardom by casting her in the lead role of the hit Broadway musical *Funny Girl* and producing its movie adaptation (1964-66 and 1968 respectively), for which she won an Academy Award for best actress. Laurents had also enjoyed success in both theatre and film; he worked on the stage production of *West Side Story* and the Tony Award winning *Hallelujah, Baby!*, amongst others, and his film credits include the screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948). Conceived as 'Katie's story'[10], the treatment incorporates the writer's experiences as a student attending Cornell University in the late 1930s, and working in Hollywood during the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigations of the late 1940s and 1950s.

During the latter period, or the early Cold War, the increased tensions between America and its ideological enemy the Soviet Union gave rise to a pervasive climate of anti-communist paranoia and sparked a domestic witch-hunt for subversives in the federal government and in influential positions in the media. HUAC played a central role in the political repression during this time, and Hollywood black-listing began with the committee's first hearings on October 1947 into the communist infiltration of the film

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[9] Christopher Andersen, *The Way She Is* (London: Aurum Press, 2006), p. 208.

[10] Arick, *The Way We Were*.

industry. Following Senator McCarthy's zealous crusade to expose the alleged internal threat to American freedom and democracy in the 1950s, the period spanning the late 1940s and 1950s has been widely referred to as the McCarthy era, and relates to the controversial anti-communist activities of the Senator's high profile campaign, HUAC and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under director J. Edgar Hoover. The fear was that film offered a powerful propaganda weapon, and artists were barred from work by the studios on the basis of real or suspected left-wing sympathies or affiliations. Many individuals were members or former members of various left-wing organisations that had flourished during the Depression, such as the American Communist party. But HUAC's definition of political subversion also extended to individuals who had shown support for or had become involved with the type of liberal political causes that had enjoyed widespread support during the New Deal era. The contribution to films addressing social concerns were similarly cited as evidence of the 'Red Menace'.[11]

A number of individuals summoned to answer charges before the committee refused to co-operate, most famously 'The Hollywood Ten' in 1947, which included the screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, and were the committee's first 'unfriendly' witnesses. In defiance of HUAC, the 'Ten' took the First amendment and were consequently banned from working in Hollywood, and later served jail terms for contempt of Congress. Controversially, other film industry professionals opted to 'name names' thereby incriminating friends and associates, rather than see their own careers destroyed. The most famous amongst HUAC's 'friendly' witnesses was the highly influential director Elia Kazan, whose testimony in 1952 ensured he could continue to direct films and plays, but cast a pall over his artistic achievements that continues to this day.[12] Kazan and his sympathisers maintain naming names was a courageous stand for freedom

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[11] Andrew Justin Falk, *Upstaging the Cold War: American Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy, 1940-1960* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), pp. 103-4.

[12] For an expert re-assessment of Kazan's films and career see Brian Neve, *Elia Kazan: The Cinema of an American Outsider* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009).

against those in the industry who advocated a totalitarian state, and was therefore a moral not a practical decision. The contention of America's anti-communists, however, that left-liberal artists and socially conscious filmmaking were part of a wider communist conspiracy committed to overthrowing American democracy, has little basis in fact.[13] In the end, more than 300 artists and personnel were blacklisted, leaving many careers in ruins and having a cataclysmic effect on lives and families. It also stifled creativity and the desire to use film to explore substantive themes.[14] Laurents discovered he had been blacklisted when Paramount refused to consider his employment on the adaptation of a stage musical to the screen in the late 1940s.[15] The screenwriter eventually cleared his name. Apparently a review of the anti-racist message film *The Home of the Brave* (1949) in the communist newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, mentioning the writer as having penned the original stage play, had prompted HUAC to act.[16]

In spite of official efforts to suppress dissenting voices, however, a small number of banned screenwriters managed to continue working under pseudonyms, and these, and other writers of varying political persuasions, ensured that the concerns and controversies of the period were played out metaphorically on the screen in a variety of different generic guises. *On the Waterfront* (1954), Kazan's drama about mob violence and corruption among New York longshoremen, for example, was '[D]esigned in part as

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[13] Michael Freedland, *Witch-hunt in Hollywood: McCarthyism's War on Tinseltown* (London: JR Books, 2009), pp. 12-13.

[14] Freedland, *Witch-hunt*, p. 19

[15] Laurents, *Original Story*, p. 286.

[16] Ibid., p. 289. Laurents first came to the attention of the State Department during the Second World War. Whilst serving in the Army radio unit in New York as a script writer, his vocal support of reform within the army (Soldier Vote) was considered subversive by the military establishment, and he was summoned to Washington to account for his political views. No punitive action was taken, but his subsequent work was screened by Washington. See Laurents, *Original Story*, p. 29.

a veiled, ambivalent defence of [his] testimony', writes Charles J. Maland.[17] *Spartacus* (1960), on the other hand, the multi-Oscar winning ancient slave epic that officially broke the black list when Trumbo was publicly acknowledged as having penned the screenplay, covertly advances an opposing viewpoint.[18] The screenwriter has argued 'I am Spartacus', the famous proclamation of each re-captured slave in the film's climactic scene when asked to identify their leader in exchange for leniency, was meant to signify the solidarity of those who refused to co-operate with HUAC.[19] Yet, despite the gradual lifting of the black-list in the 1960s, at the same time as progressive values and ideals once again began to gain a wider currency in American society, it remained a highly controversial subject in American film and was still only addressed obliquely or in coded form.[20] Thus, Stark's decision to take Laurents' screenplay, the first to explicitly deal with the blacklist, and begin pre-production 20 years after the hearings on the one hand can be seen to reflect America's changed socio-political climate. Or, on the other hand, it suggests the film was being made at a safe temporal distance and that Hollywood was finally prepared to reflect on this shameful episode in its history.

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[17] Charles J. Maland, 'The American Adam' in Peter C. Rollins (ed.), *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 564. See also Chapter 5: 'Behind the Waterfront' in Nora Sayre, *Running Time: Films of the Cold War* (New York: The Dial Press, 1982).

[18] For an insightful analysis of the progressivism of individual directors and in specific films during the black-list era see Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, Brian Neve, and Peter Stanfield (eds.), *"Un-American" Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008). Cautioning against overstating the impact of these films on the level of allegory or metaphor, Krutnik, Neale, Neve and Stanfield point out, 'the overwhelming number of contemporary reviews interpreted... "blacklist" films in terms of their entertainment and artistic rather than as political parables.' See Krutnik, Neale, Neve and Stanfield, *"Un-American"* p. 7. A rigourously researched history of the 'Red Scare' in Hollywood be can be found in Larry Ceplair Steve Englund's book *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980). Allegories of paranoia, such as the science fiction film *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), the western *High Noon* ((1952), could be read both ways, as either anti-communist or anti-McCarthyite.

[19] Peter Hanson, *Dalton Trumbo, Hollywood Rebel: A Critical Survey and Filmography* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2001), pp. 144-5.

[20] *The Planet of the Apes* (1968), for example, which was co-written by the former blacklistee Michael Wilson, has been cited by some scholars as an allegory of Hollywood's anti-communist crusade. Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *Hide in Plain Sight: The Hollywood Blacklistees in Film and Television, 1950-2002* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. vii, ix-xi, + xvii.

Another likely influence on the decision to make the film was *Love Story,* the highest grossing movie of 1970. With the nation's screens dominated by male heroes in the early 1970s, comparatively few romantic melodramas were produced by Hollywood, but the breakaway success of the film, which starred Ali McGraw opposite Ryan O'Neal, proved that, given the right formula, there was still a healthy market for the genre. Echoing *Love Story*, *The Way We Were* features a working class 'ethnic' female and an upper-middle class 'Wasp' male who meet at an Ivy League University, and it is about love triumphing over socio-economic difference, except this time their relationship becomes entwined with the story's political context. Similarly, emulating *Love Story*'s marketing strategy, *The Way We Were* was pre-sold from Laurents' novelisation of the story, and sentimental title song, sung by Streisand, became a number one hit single.[21]

Streisand was touched by Laurents' story of bitter-sweet love and identified with Katie Morosky's political principles. The actress was a staunch liberal and an active member of the Democratic Party, and she campaigned for the party's presidential nominee George McGovern in the 1972 elections. She was also keen to take on her first serious role, and immediately committed herself to the project.[22] Thus, although it represented something of a departure for the actress, having up to this point appeared only in musicals and comedy, it was the first role she would play that explicitly complemented her political orientation. Nevertheless, in spite of certain generic differences, Katie's characterisation and the story's romantic narrative arc display clear continuities with the past roles that made her famous.

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[21] The significant impact top-hits of the period had on future patterns of production is discussed in Peter Krämer's study *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005). For an informed discussion of production and marketing strategies in Hollywood during the late 1960s and 1970s see James Monaco, *American Film Now: The People, the Power, the Money, the Movies* (New York: New American Library, 1984), pp. 10-27.

[22] Arick, *The Way We Were*.

After the seminal work of Richard Dyer (1979), star studies has developed into a major area of research for film scholars. Dyer's approach to the analysis of stars is a blend of semiotics and sociology. The semiotic approach posits stars as texts or images formed from a confluence of different signs and meanings. This approach allows us to understand the way star image works in relation to ideological issues such as class, gender and race, issues that are often contradictory in nature but which stars, by their very nature, are able to resolve. The sociological approach stems from the analysis of stars as a product of intertextuality. In other words, star image are not generated solely by filmic texts, but through their interaction with non-filmic texts of promotion, publicity, criticism and performance. Examining the intertextuality of stars enables us to situate them within the context of wider social and cultural discourses, and interpret their meaning or meanings for cinemagoers at a particular historical moment.[23]

Indeed, the extraordinary success of the Broadway hit and film *Funny Girl* that cemented Streisand's stardom in the 1960s, can in part be ascribed to the convergence of her role in the musical as the Jewish comedienne and performer Fanny Brice and her own public image. Similar to Brice's rise from a working in a burlesque revue to performing with the Ziegfeld Follies in the early twentieth century, Streisand's fame was an 'impossible dream come true', overcoming her disadvantaged background growing up on a Brooklyn housing project to achieve fame on Broadway, as a singing and recording artist and Hollywood star.[24] Significantly, she was also America's first openly Jewish superstar, and her rise coincided with a period of profound social and cultural flux during which the country's integrationist ideals were increasingly contested

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[23] For a revised edition of Dyer's seminal study (1979), which includes a supplementary chapter by Paul McDonald covering more recent developments in Star studies, such as the analysis of stars and their audiences, see Richard Dyer, and Paul McDonald, *Stars*, New ed. (London: BFI Publishing, 1997).

[24] Quote taken from Guy Flatley, 'Bewitched, Barbra'd And Bewildered', *New York Times*, 21 January 1973, *The Way We Were* microfiche, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverley Hills, California. By the time Streisand made her Oscar winning debut in the screen adaptation of *Funny Girl* (1968), the year's highest earning film, she had released a succession of popular albums of standards and collected four Grammy awards

by discourses of racial and ethnic pride and pluralism. As a consequence of these changes the appearance of 'hyphenated' Americans, and ethnic themes and subject matter, became far more commonplace on the nation's movie screen. 'I arrived here', Streisand oft-proclaimed, 'without having my nose fixed, my teeth capped, or my name changed, and that is very gratifying to me.'[25] The ethnic identity politics of the period were also paralleled by the growth in feminism, and similarly Streisand's stardom manifested success in a man's world on merit and personality rather than looks, or at least those that conform to conventional or patriarchal norms of screen beauty.[26]

Streisand's social and cultural significance was thus intrinsic to her persona as the Jewish 'ugly duckling', who through a combination of intelligence, humour, and chutzpah achieves career success and 'becomes' beautiful.[27] The resonance of her persona with the emergent identity based movements of the 1960s, however, constitutes only proportion of a complex whole. A more complete picture indicates that Streisand's popularity resides in her intermediary status between continuity and change. In other words, the intersection of her persona with discourses of liberalism, feminism and ethnic revivalism are offset or indeed undermined by the nostalgia and classicism of her screen roles in hit movies such as *Funny Girl* and *Hello, Dolly!* (1969) with their traditional love stories, clear moral distinctions, uncomplicated audience identification and upbeat endings. Typically her character trajectory involves establishment of her moral superiority, and also, in films such as *What's Up, Doc?* (1972) and *The Way We Were*, results in her winning the affections of a handsome, gentile man. As such, her star image represents an easily accessible otherness and contemporary version of femininity

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[25] Barbra Streisand Biography (*The Way We Were* press pack) [*The Way We Were* microfiche/AMPAS].

[26] Around the time *The Way We Were* was released the women's movement registered a significant impact on mainstream politics with the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972 and the legalisation of abortion the following year. See Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s*, 1st ed (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), p. 112.

[27] Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 19 + 322-3.

that reinvigorated past styles and genres without alienating mainstream audiences, and thus in some measure reflected their ambivalence over the accelerated rate of social and cultural change during the 1960s and early 1970s.[28] Indeed, as writes Wojcick, '[T]he major contradiction in Streisand's persona is that between two modes of desire - the first, romantic longing and the second, a drive for freedom and independence.'[29] As Jeanine Basinger established in her influential study *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960,* this 'contradiction' could just as easily be used to describe the central conflict of the 'woman's film' genre.[30] In tune with traditional attitudes towards gender in this period, the female protagonists of the 'woman's film' made during Hollywood's studio era are forced to choose between these two incompatible desires, a convention in *The Way We Were* that, as we shall see, is modified to reflect changes in social attitudes.

In contrast to Streisand's enthusiasm for Laurents' screenplay, Robert Redford initially turned down the offer to co-star in the film. Hubbell, he complained, was 'too one dimensional', the love story 'overly sentimental and drippy', and he dismissed the script's political message in no uncertain terms as 'bullshit knee-jerk liberalism'.[31] In spite of his lack of interest, Redford was still considered to be vital to the film by all involved, not least because he was considered one of the few actors that would not be overwhelmed by Streisand's assertive performance style. Remaining committed to casting the young star, it was decided the way to attract him was to employ his close

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[28] The extent of this ambivalence was further indicated by the biggest hit of 1971, a film with strong stylistic and thematic similarities to Streisand's work. The multi-Oscar winning *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), is a reassuringly nostalgic musical about a traditional Jewish religious community in early twentieth century Russia struggling to come to terms with the modern attitudes of the younger generation, and, under the rule of country's anti-semitic Tsarist autocracy, facing threats to its cultural survival.

[29] Pamela Robertson Wojcik, 'A Star is Born Again, Or, How Streisand Recycles Garland', in Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros (eds.), *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (Sydney: Power publications, 1999), p. 197.

[30] See Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960*, 1st ed (New York: Knopf, 1993).

[31] Quoted in Andersen, *The Way*, p. 208.

friend and collaborator Sydney Pollack to direct the picture.[32] Pollack had directed Redford in *This Property is Condemned* (1966) and the existential 'mountain man' epic *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972). Yet aside from facilitating Redford's employment, these and other films, such as his Depression-era social parable *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969), display recurrent concerns that the director would bring to bear on *The Way We Were.* Chief among these, as Patricia Erens notes, is Pollack's 'skepticism concerning man's ability to discover a meaningful existence,' yet, at the same time, his 'genuine sympathy for the frailities of his characters.'[33] Formerly an actor on stage and screen, the director was also noted for his ability to draw out complex performances in his actors and expose contradictions in the characters they play.[34]

Redford was eventually persuaded to accept the part after he was offered more money and on the understanding that Hubbell, whom both he and Pollack agreed was narrowly drawn as the idealised object of Katie's desire, would be developed into a more substantial character in order to bring more balance and complexity to the story. Indeed, Laurents had endowed Hubbell with the ability to view an issue or problem from both perspectives, but Pollack and Redford wanted to give the character more 'teeth'. They wanted him to challenge Katie on her political commitments, with the principal aim of avoiding the facile moral absolutes that formed the common perception in the 1970s of the McCarthyite period.[35]

A key additional sequence that illustrates how Hubbell's character was re-worked takes place at Los Angeles' Union Station when the Committee for the First Amendment, which includes Katie, returns from Washington where they had been protesting at the

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[32] Ibid., p. 210.

[33] Patricia Erens, 'The Way We Are', *Film Comment*, vol. 11, no. 5 (Sept-Oct 1975), p. 24.

[34] Ibid., p. 25.

[35] Arick, *The Way*.

HUAC hearings of the 'Hollywood Ten'.[36] Hubbell meets her at the station and as they leave they are confronted by a vociferous counter-demonstration. The couple eventually find refuge in a deserted cafe, but not before a personal insult is aimed at Katie, compelling Hubbell to punch the offending demonstrator to the ground. Angry and agitated Hubbell challenges Katie on her misplaced idealism. 'People are more important than any goddam witch hunt,' Hubbell asserts, 'You and me. Not causes, not principles.' All the destructive consequences of refusing to co-operate with the investigations, upon careers, lives and families, he warns, will ultimately be for nothing, because after the Red Scare has abated mutual self interest and hypocrisy will once again prevail in Hollywood, and the accused will resume working for 'fascist' producers.

The Union Station scene, which makes explicit the essential conflict between the two characters, is also crucial in reshaping Hubbell to complement Redford's star persona. The essence of this, as David Downing describes it, was '[H]is conservative-style rebellion,', which 'managed to please most conservatives and most rebels', a contradictory characteristic that chimed with the ideological shifts and cross-currents under way at the end of the 1960s and coincided with the actor's breakthrough in the hit western *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969).[37] James Monaco observes of this pivotal period in the nation's history, '[W]hile many of the public mythologies that had prevailed in the United States since the end of World War II were shaken to their roots, this fact did not derail the dominant culture,' and '[I]n many ways, American society and its core institutions were preserved intact in the late 1960s.'[38] As a consequence, Americans became increasingly inward-looking as the country confronted a new reality

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[36] Katie is a member of the Committee for the First Amendment. The committee is based on the group of Hollywood professionals of the same name that included the director John Huston and the actor Humphrey Bogart, amongst others, which protested against the government's anti-communist investigations.

[37] David Downing, *Robert Redford* (London: W. H Allen and Co., 1982), p. 158.

[38] Paul Monaco, *The Sixties: 1960-1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 6

in the aftermath of the social conflicts of the period, a shift given impetus by a combination of different, inter-related factors. Chief among these was a conservative backlash; the desire for stability coupled with skepticism over the rate of social and cultural change that brought President Nixon to the White House in 1968. The economic recession of the early 1970s further shifted attention away from the social hopes and solidarity of the 1960s. Linked to concerns over the nation's social stability and economic security was the growing disillusionment many Americans felt towards established authority and the country's institutions, an attitude that could also be attributed to futility of America's protracted overseas war in Vietnam and the unfolding Watergate scandal. On a cultural level, the increasing emphasis on 'the personal' over 'the political' was symptomatic of this broad ideological re-alignment. These were the dual realms that characterised the consciousness movements of racial and ethnic minorities, feminists in the 1960s, and the gay liberation movement the following decade. During the 1970s the focus within these movements shifted onto the realm of self-exploration and the assertion of individual identity, a desire underpinning the concurrent rise of New Age spirituality, the revival of established religion, the growth of the ecology movement and the political mobilisation of the elderly. The received idea of a cohesive national identity was no longer given the credence of decades past, as America was subject to the centrifugal force generated by the many different journeys of self discovery undertaken by millions of its inhabitants.[39]

Within this shifting context, Redford's persona captured the temper of the times; the conventional sex appeal, rugged individualism and effectiveness of the traditional Hollywood hero, modulated with a reflectiveness that suggests a lack of certainty over the hero's moral code and the values he embodies, and which also has the effect of distancing him from the viewer. The actor starred in many successful 'historical films'

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[39] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), pp. 78-101. See also Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

during this period such as *The Sting* (1973) and *The Great Gatsby* (1974), demonstrating that his reconciliation of the traditional hero and the contemporary 'outsider' was well suited to films with historical settings, inasmuch as it embodies their dialogical character. Indeed, part of the pleasure and appeal of 'historical films' is how they draw on and reinforce a received version of the past, which inescapably evokes older Hollywood movies, a major repository of popular historical memory and myth, at the same time as inflecting this version of the past with the attitudes, values and concerns of the present.[40] The 'mountain-man' western *Jeremiah Johnson*, for example, is about the making of a legend that is grounded in a sense of reality. Channeling 1970s disillusion, it charts the experiences of an ex-soldier and drop-out in the mid-1800s who turns his back on civilisation and seeks personal autonomy amongst the harsh beauty of the Rocky Mountains, revealing his heroic qualities but also the cultural misunderstandings and savage violence of frontier life. Both the inspiration and location for the film was the area around Sundance, Redford's self-built home high in the mountains of Utah and away from Hollywood, and a source of his own distinctive 'outsider/rebel' mythos.

A degree of self-conscious myth-making is also evident in *The Way We Were* and the characterisation of Hubbell, the 'Golden WASP' whom Katie dubs 'America the beautiful'. The conviction Redford and Pollack wanted to bring to the character, however, satisfied another related facet of the actor's persona; his disinclination to trust political idealism. Although a prominent environmentalist and advocate of rights for Native American Indians, the actor described himself as 'apolitical' and was cynical about both left and right wing ideology, and the American political system in general. This stance in the story is also related to his character's willingness to make

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[40] The practice of selecting certain actors, who due to their looks, voice, mannerisms and so on, help situate a film in particular era is conceptualised by Christine Sprengler as 'period casting'. That Redford appeared on films set in variety of different eras - 1870s, 1890s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s - suggests his persona was less specific and possessed a paradoxical historical timelessness. See Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, pp. 80-3.

compromises in order to preserve his career and way of life, a sense of pragmatic self-regard that in *Jeremiah Johnson* is imbued with an 'existential authenticity', but in *The Way We Were* is cast in a more ambiguous light.[41]

Pollack had originally wanted to foreground Hubbell's complex and contradictory nature by opening the film with him naming names, but Stark argued against it, insisting that it would turn Redford into a villain and thus damage the movie's commercial prospects.[42] Hubbell's testimony was one of a number of scenes penned by Trumbo, who had had first hand experience of the HUAC investigations. Indeed, on the one hand, Hubbell's testimony could have been construed as a proof of a weak character that lacks moral fibre and is motivated by self-interest. This is given contrasting emphasis because for the first part of Trumbo's scene he is in a combative mood and refuses to grovel before the committee. To Hubbell the investigation's mandate is as dubious as left-wing politics are quixotic. On the other, it is constructed in such a way to ameliorate Hubbell's co-operation and gently challenge the received wisdom of the McCarthyite era, not by asking for sympathy, but by making it to some degree understandable considering the circumstances. After it has been revealed he had previously lied under oath when he had denied either attending a Communist Party meeting (he had attended one 'open' meeting) or submitting a script written by a black-listed writer under his own name, he is faced with a dilemma; either names names or face a lengthy jail sentence for perjury. Thus, it is not simply his career that is at stake but his freedom too, and, on top of this, he demonstrates a willingness to facilitate the work of a black-listee, in spite of the risks involved.[43]

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[41] The problematic relationship between principles and personal advancement is a theme of *The Candidate* (1972), another production conceived by Redford, released the year before. In the film he plays Bill McKay, an altruistic Senatorial nominee and rank outsider in a Californian election contest who, with nothing to lose, speaks with unusual candour on the issues of the day. When this proves popular with the electorate and he has a chance of defeating the incumbent, however, he agrees to make compromises and his idealism falls foul to the media's distorting lens.

[42] Andersen, *The Way*, pp. 212-213

[43] Dalton Trumbo to Sydney Pollack (letter plus drafts of individual scenes), 13 August 1972, Collection 1554, Box 180, Folder 1, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, California.

Trumbo was one of eleven writers that included Alvin Sargeant, Francis Ford Coppola, Paddy Chayefsky and Herb Gardner, employed to re-write the screenplay following Laurents' dismissal from the project.[44] Yet, in the process of being re-shaped, it had also became increasingly uneven and incoherent, resulting in Stark re-employing Laurents to get the film back on track. Both Laurents and Streisand were of the opinion that Hubbell had been built up, often at the expense of Katie, in the screenwriter's absence, and during his second spell he made efforts to restore some of the story's original balance and direction. In many instances this was to be of no avail, either because the scenes had already been shot or because of Pollack and Redford's opposition. One change that could not be reversed, for example, was that in the early part of the film Hubbell had been elevated from a member of the student rowing team to the college's pre-eminent 'jock', who also excelled at the javelin, shot-put, and track running.[45]

Another source of frustration for Laurents was Pollack's 'mishandling' of the film's political story, particularly due to the fact the veteran screenwriter was the only member of the production team who had firsthand experience of the witch hunt. An important sequence that illustrates Laurents' complaint draws on the historical record insofar as it involves the Committee for the First Amendment. As Laurents points out, however, this scene is historically inaccurate on two counts; the scene has the committee arriving back in Los Angeles' Union Station by train after protesting at the HUAC hearings in Washingtonrather than by air, where they are confronted by an angry counter-protest, which in reality never occurred. But such inaccuracies and falsehoods in historical films invariably serve a narrative purpose or help to develop character, and in this instance it was another opportunity to impart some heroic qualities to Hubbell. In reference to Hubbell's brawl with the demonstrator, Laurents cynically recalls: 'Hubbell may be a

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[44] Andersen, *The Way*, p. 211.

[45] Laurents, *Original Story*, p. 275.

writer, but he is man of action. Robert Redford is strong'. Laurents did have some success in redressing the balance, however, none more significant than the single line of dialogue he fought hard to protect that underscores the characters' fundamental differences. 'Hubbell. People *are* their principles', retorts Katie in the Union Station cafe, after her husband has angrily accused her of privileging the latter over the former.[46]

By the far the most contentious change to *The Way We Were*, however, was Pollack's last minute edit following the first of two test screenings in San Francisco. During the screening the director observed the audience rapidly lose interest towards the end of the film when the love story becomes intertwined with the political story. As such, it was destined to become a 'flop', maintains Pollack, so he took the decision to make a cut of seven to eight minutes. The next night the audience's attention was unbroken and the film was a 'hit', notwithstanding the resulting lack of coherence and misleading sequence of narrative events.[47] The series of scenes Pollack excised not only explain the blacklist and how it destroyed the careers and lives of people working in Hollywood, but also the real reason why Katie and Hubbell decide to split up. This results from the ultimatum given to Hubbell by his studio boss; an old college friend of Katie's has turned informant, and either she agrees to name names, or by association his career is effectively over. Katie, who is heavily pregnant, will not betray her friends or her beliefs and consequentially the couple agree to separate when their baby is born. In light of the situation, Barbra Streisand contends, this decision 'is an acceptance of reality,' that gives Katie 'character, strength and intelligence'.[48] With the section removed, however, one gains the impression she has not come to this decision based on political principles, but because of her discovery earlier in the film that Hubbell had been unfaithful to her

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[46] Ibid., pp. 277-8.

[47] Arick, *The Way*.

[48] Ibid.

one afternoon with his old girlfriend from college, Carol-Ann. Unhappy with this edit, after viewing the finished film, the actress was also highly critical of the amount of times Katie is shown shedding tears over Hubbell. 'You're making Katie look like a sap.' she told Pollack. 'She's a strong woman. She's not going to be destroyed by a guy. Any guy.'[49]

The politics of style and the focus of the 'look'

In spite of efforts to make Redford's role more substantive, *The Way We Were* remains at its basis a 'woman's film'. Like all genres, the 'woman's film' has familiar conventions, such as an emphasis on romance, for example, and, perhaps self-evidently it 'is a movie that places at center of its universe', writes Jeanine Basinger, 'a woman who is trying to deal with emotional, social and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact she is a woman'. But the main characteristic of the 'woman's film', she stresses, is that the protagonist is forced 'to choose between two contradictory paths: one that will empower/liberate her and one that will provide her with love.'[50] These problems and choices provide dramatic interest, and, typically for a Hollywood romance, they stem from the character conflict between Katie and Hubbell. At the same time, opposites attract, as the popular idiom reminds us, and the qualities and characteristics that give rise to this conflict are also in part why they are drawn to one another.

The defining characteristic of Katie's self-identity is her left-wing politics. This is both a source of audience sympathy and deployed to highlight her flaws. Indeed, within the realm of politics is where Katie has purpose and feels most comfortable. Yet the manner in which she asserts these views often betrays her insecurities. This is particularly

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[49] Andersen, *The Way*, p. 217.

[50] Basinger, *A Woman's View*, p. 21.

evident when Katie is around Hubbell and his upper-class friends, a privileged social group she inveighs against, but one which also represents a certain ideal that she is at once attracted to and threatened by. As a consequence of these conflicting feelings she is prone to overreact, becoming judgmental or defensive, which enables her to keep people at a safe emotional distance.

A key sequence that acts to establish *The Way We Were* as a 'woman's film' is Katie's extended flashback to when she first encountered Hubbell at college in the late 1930s. This provides the backstory to their subsequent romance and marriage in the second half of the 1940s, and sets up the underlying conflict between each character and their social identities. In it, Katie, the president of the Young Communist League, fits the stock image of a 1930s female radical with her modest attire, bonnet and frizzy hair (See Fig. 2). She organises a 'Peace Strike' calling for total disarmament in the Spanish Civil War, and wins over a crowd of students with her impassioned speech. However, when placards are mischievously raised reading 'Any Peace But Katie's Piece' to much uproarious laughter, instead of keeping her composure she storms off the podium angrily denouncing the crowd as 'fascists'. Katie's speech awakens Hubbell's desire, but socially and as individuals they appear worlds apart. He is a handsome and gifted athlete, who mixes in a rather exclusive upper class social set, and dates the beautiful Carol-Ann. Aside from study, most of Katie's time is taken up by her political activities or working in a diner to make ends meet. Yet, though ideologically opposed to the hegemony of America's Wasp elite, she is nevertheless attracted to Hubbell in spite of herself. But Hubbell is not altogether comfortable with what is ostensibly an enviable life of ease. In a creative writing class his self-reflective short story, 'The All-American Smile', reveals how this perception makes him feel like a fraud and has eroded his sense of purpose, a personal revelation that undercuts his mythic aura and intensifies Katie's feelings for him. Hubbell's self-doubt also allows Katie to displace some of her determination, an inherent quality of Streisand's star image, onto his character; his first

literary effort, ‘A Country Made of Ice Cream’ published some time before they meet again in the mid-1940s was not a success, but Katie enthusiastically tells him she has read it twice, provides constructive criticism and encourages Hubbell to resurrect his career as a writer.

Fig 4.1 Katie addresses the ‘Peace’ strike

Katie’s chance encounter with Hubbell at a New York night club at the end of the Second World War is the trigger for her nostalgic reminiscences and marks the beginning of their romantic involvement. During the war she has been working for the Office of War Information (OWI) as an assistant radio producer, and significantly no longer dresses like a student radical, and instead wears fashionable clothing, make-up and her hair straightened. Her new image is closer to the received idea of Hollywood screen beauty and makes her a more plausible love interest (See Fig 4.2). In addition, it signifies her shifting priorities, or the conflict at the heart of Streisand’s star persona between the desire for romantic fulfillment and personal independence.[51] Prefiguring

[51] Wojcik, A Star, p. 197.

her flashback this encounter is constructed to present the female view, and in such a way that inverts the normative male 'look' of mainstream Hollywood cinema.

In a point of view tracking shot Katie spots Hubbell in uniform sitting asleep at the bar, oblivious to the attentions of an attractive woman. A shot-reverse shot showing Katie exhaling with her lips slightly parted and the camera zooming in for a close-up of Hubbell's face makes her desire palpable. Traditionally, in Hollywood cinema the male protagonist can be characterised as active and the female as passive, a central distinction often reinforced by the film's visual construction which presents women as the erotic object of male spectatorial desire. Gender representation in Hollywood and its relationship to the unconscious workings of patriarchal ideology are the concerns of Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), a groundbreaking polemical essay whose explanatory model is based on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and which laid the foundations of feminist film discourse in the contemporary era.[52] The chance encounter in the nightclub is significant because it apparently reverses this dominant tendency, with Katie in active control of a passive image of Hubbell, elements of which, in accordance with Mulvey's observations of the male 'gaze', she fetishises. Indeed, Hubbell's distinctly Waspish allure is conveyed through his striking appearance; his white naval uniform which strongly contrasts with the khaki clothing worn by the other servicemen in the club, coupled with his distinctive blond hair that Katie is compelled to touch. Connoting purity, innocence and superiority, this image invokes the complementary myths of the 'golden Wasp' and the World War II as the 'good war.'[53]

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[52] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 14-26.

[53] Studs Terkel famously debunked the latter myth by revealing the brutal reality of the conflict in *'The Good War': An Oral History of World War II* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

Steve Neale argues against Mulvey's strict active/male, passive/female dichotomy, but observes the objectification of the male body in mainstream Hollywood film is contingent upon certain conditions that seek to disavow or repress the latent homoerotic pleasure in such images. In contrast to the 'controlling' male gaze Mulvey describes, writes Neale, these images are typically indirect or mediated, and invariably incorporate the male body's objectification within scenes of physical action.[54] That Hubbell is asleep during this sequence appears diametrically opposed to this observation. But the attention of two women strongly suggests he is heterosexual and his military uniform denotes he is a man of action, which is affirmed when Katie's desiring look dissolves into a sequence of images of Hubbell running, rowing and throwing the javelin and shot put as his college friends enthusiastically cheer him on.

Fig 4.2 A more plausible love interest

Notwithstanding the conditions Neale identifies, Katie's subjective memories of her college days foreground Hubbell as a source of visual pleasure, and, by contrast, are a tacit acknowledgment that her looks do not conform to the conventional norms of screen beauty. As a result of this comparative absence, Hubbell, though patently an

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[54] Steve Neale, Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema, *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1983), pp. 2-16.

‘active’ character, is the focus of the ‘look’. That the majority of Hubbell’s friends, and most notably his beautiful girlfriend Carol-Ann, echo his classical good looks brings added emphasis, furthermore indicating that Katie is not simply attracted to an individual but also a mythic ideal: the all-American WASP. This perception is inherent in the film’s nostalgic visual construction, which itself is foregrounded by Katie’s own warm yet ambivalent memories of the late 1930s containing the alluring signifiers - the preppy clothing, expensive evening wear and picturesque Ivy League college campus - of the privileged and carefree.

During their time together in New York Katie remains politically active, but after they move to Hollywood she increasingly assumes the role of a supportive wife who puts her husband’s career first, at least up until the HUAC investigations. This phase of the story begins with a familiar convention of the ‘woman’s film’ as described by Basinger; ‘the bliss montage’ or ‘Happy Interlude (after they meet and before something goes wrong)’.[55] ‘The Happy Interlude may include 'action',’ she adds, ‘but this is 'static'. Not story driven and an affirmation of courage as in men's films, but ritual events, defined by the nature of society; women are bound by the rules.’ Indeed, accompanied by the soaring strings of the film’s romantic musical theme, a montage shows the couple sailing, swimming and happily unpacking their belongings in their half-decorated beach house.[56] That it follows a loving married couple in this situation would typically start a family, is anticipated by a shot of Hubbell erecting a beach volley ball net surrounded by small children.

After this sequence, the couple’s Hollywood milieu becomes the focus, as Hubbell begins work on his first screenplay. Yet, as the film foregrounds the sun-kissed glamour of tennis matches, convertible sports cars and film industry parties, it is insidiously

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[55] Basinger, *A Woman’s*, p. 7.

[56] Ibid. p. 9.

undermined by HUAC's lengthening shadow. At a screening of *The Last of the Apaches* organised by the director Bissinger at his opulent home, a bugging device is discovered behind a painting. The story, the screenwriter Brooks Carpenter wryly observes, could be considered un-American because the Indians are the 'good guys'. In the main, up until the end of the 1940s, Native Americans 'appeared in westerns.... as villains duly defeated in the last reel,' observes John Saunders. But in the following decade 'a new respect for the Indian side of the story' was evident in films such as *Broken Arrow* (1950) and *Broken Lance* (1954), in part an indication of changing perceptions of race in America.[57] By the time *Little Big Man* and *Soldier Blue* (both 1970) are released, whose inversion of the moral binaries of earlier westerns westerns chime in with the widespread social and political dissent of the late 1960s, Saunders notes, 'the demythologising process is well under way'.[58] As such, the premise of Carpenter's revisionist western may have had a particular resonance for audiences in the early 1970s. The title of his film is also a play on James Fenimore Cooper's popular novel *The Last of the Mohicans*.[59] Fenimore's book was first published in 1826 and subsequently its title has been used proverbially with reference to the sole survivor of a noble race or 'type'. Notable for their brutal conflict with American settlers and military forces as the nation expanded south and westward into their tribal lands and threatened their resources, the nobility of Apaches Indians refers to their struggle for cultural survival. In the scene this meaning is deployed as a rich source of irony, as Hubbell is juxtaposed with the film's title as the rest of the guests leave the screening lounge, and a zoom shot emphasises his pensive expression. Firstly, corresponding to the film's contemporaneous cultural themes this sequence has a dual meaning, on the one hand serving as a reminder that America's Wasp 'nobility' succeeded in subjugating the

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[57] John Saunders, *The Western Genre: From Lordsburg to Big Whiskey* (London: Wallflower, 2001), pp. 93-4.

[58] Ibid., p. 94.

[59] James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983).

native population, and on the other hand playfully suggesting as an integrating ethic the country's dominant culture is in decline. Secondly, the close-up of Hubbell's face in the darkened room as the concern and outrage of the other guests is heard off-screen provides a further contrast, indicating a lack of certainty over the values he stands for. The Committee for the First Amendment's defense of freedom of speech is a noble cause Hubbell will not subscribe to. Moral or cultural concerns will be subordinated to the issue of personal survival. Indeed, he may possess the intellectual capacity to understand issues from both perspectives and provide valid criticism of Katie's views, but he lacks moral backbone and has no firm principles, particularly when it comes to his career. This weakness in his character is exposed again when he drops his resistance to the demands of Bissinger over his screenplay, and pleads with him to keep him on as the writer so he can implement the director's 'concept'.

Up until Katie's decision to protest the HUAC investigations in Washington, her character and relationship with Hubbell converges with Streisand's own attitude towards the relative importance of her career and personal life, and the varied and conflicting conceptions of gender equality during a period when it was being hotly debated in the national media.[60] Though maintaining '[T]he question of women's lib is confusing and there are no definite answers', the opinions she did express reflected a moderate position.[61] On the one hand, her condemnation of the disrespectful and condescending attitude of many men towards women, and her conviction as a working mother that women can have both a family and career, chimed with the central tenets of 'second wave' feminism.[62] And so too did her assertion 'a woman is liberated when she

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[60] Schulman, *The Seventies*, pp. 163-4.

[61] Brenda Marshall, 'Barbra Streisand: For and Against Women's Lib', *Whisper*, April 1973 [*Barbra Streisand* clippings/AMPAS].

[62] Spearheaded by Betty Friedan, the author of the landmark book *The Feminine Mystique*, 'second wave' feminism, like the racial egalitarianism espoused by Martin Luther King, called for a genuinely equal and fully integrated American society. See Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, pp. 122-3.

has no guilt.'[63] On the other hand this statement is made with reference to mothers irrespective of whether they choose to pursue a career or become a housewife, which puts her at odds with the more radical feminist view that by accepting such traditional female roles women were submitting to patriarchal domination.[64] Indeed, Katie's decision to accommodate Hubbell's ambition to become a successful Hollywood screenwriter mirrored the actress' own plan to work less, as she told one journalist in the year the film was released: '"It's far more important to a man's ego to have a career than it is to a woman's. I don't need to work anymore to feed my ego. I get all the ego nourishment I need from him (Jon Peters).'[65] Although such views doubtless served to alienate her from some feminists, there were many more who identified with her as the embodiment of a more pragmatic position that navigated a path between the deeply entrenched assumptions pertaining to gender difference and the family, and calls for a thoroughgoing change of American society.

As has been noted, Streisand's image also derived its contemporary significance from the concurrent rise in cultural de-assimilation amongst racial and ethnic minority groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as faith in America's cherished integrationist ideal began to diminish. This shift was the subject of a whole raft of books and articles published during this period, such as Peter Schrag's *The Decline of the WASP* (1970) and Michael Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1971).[66] While America's ethnic and cultural myths are clearly a central theme in *The Way We Were* and intersect with this burgeoning discourse of race and ethnicity, in character with Hollywood's commercial tendency to have it both ways, this thematic content is conveyed with a

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[63] Marshall, 'Barbra'.

[64] Schulman, *The Seventies*, pp. 164-5.

[65] Peter Evans, 'From Barbra Streisand-The Last Word', *Cosmopolitan*, February 1974 [*Barbra Streisand* microfiche/AMPAS].

[66] Peter Schrag, *The Decline of the WASP* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970). Michael Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York: Macmillan, 1971). See also W. H. Auden, 'America is NOT a Melting Pot', *The New York Times Magazine*, March 18, 1972.

degree of subtle and calculated ambivalence: nostalgia for WASP culture as a lost ideal competes with a gentle debunking of America's dominant integrating ethic.

The evolution of Katie's character, particularly in terms of her appearance, is indicative of these contradictory tendencies. Between the late 1930s and the late 1940s she 'becomes' beautiful, a transition that is echoed in Streisand's other roles, and converges with public perceptions of the star. As the acclaimed photographer Richard Avedon explained in 1974, 'Ten years ago she decided to be beautiful, and now she is. It's sheer will power.'[67] With will, determination and chutzpah, her star image manifests the belief that one can achieve almost anything, even profoundly shaping the public perception of your physical attractiveness. But this perception was also symptomatic of a broader cultural shift. Arguably, people's conception of beauty began to diversify amidst the rising racial and ethnic consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s, undermining the preeminence of the white, north European ideal which had long sustained the myth of the ruling elite's moral, intellectual and cultural superiority and maintained racial and ethnic hierarchies. The rise of actors whose looks did not conform to this ideal, such as Streisand, or Dustin Hoffman and Sidney Poitier, appeared to confirm this shift and signal America was becoming a more integrated and egalitarian society. In spite of her political beliefs, then, Katie's trajectory - her changing appearance, romantic union with Hubbell and their idyllic life together in California - from one perspective invokes America's ethic of success and implies it is a land of increased opportunity for its millions of 'hyphenated' inhabitants.

Such a perspective is supported by the widely expressed view, amongst critics at least, that nostalgia is symptomatic of a diminished cultural elite. This is not to argue, however, such imagery does not at the same time reinforce mythical assumptions and therefore valorise the dominant culture. In this way, the film's presentation of a

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[67] Evans, 'From Barbra'.

idealised and seductive Wasp milieu functions to circumscribe this sense of increased opportunity, because it repeatedly foregrounds Katie's idiosyncratic beauty, thus signifying her problematic integration into Hubbell's elite social group. Put another way, paralleling her social and ideological incompatibility, her status within this group, in terms of her beauty, is never fully resolved. This is made explicit at the end of the war, and results from the central conflict between the two characters: Katie's passionate yet polarising preoccupation with issues and causes, and Hubbell's cynical and dismissive attitude towards political engagement. Hubbell's attitude towards politics is shared by his rich Republican friends and after Katie reacts angrily to a number of insensitive jokes they make at the expense of President Roosevelt and his wife on the day it is announced he has died, he publicly rebukes her and then decides to break off their relationship. Yet Katie's first instinct is that his decision is based on her 'style' and the way she looks, declaring herself to Hubbell to be 'not attractive in the right way'. Carol Ann is the quintessence of the attractiveness to which she refers and Hubbell also evidently finds appealing. Nevertheless he is attracted to Katie in spite of this fact, and equally because she does not conform to his usual type; however frustrating and difficult at times he finds it, she is 'her own girl, with her own style'.

The socio-cultural significance of these contrasting and competing 'types' is implicit and often ambiguous throughout the majority of the film, but in the final scene is brought into sharper relief and invested with a clearer meaning. It depicts a chance encounter between Katie and Hubbell on a New York street some years after they separate and establishes a circularity in the story's narrative structure. Katie is distributing leaflets and petitioning against the atomic bomb and Hubbell, accompanied by his new partner, is in town writing for a television show. For both of them, what is a welcome and pleasant surprise is also suffused with a sense of regret over what could have been. After putting his partner in a waiting cab Hubbell asks Katie about their daughter that he is not seen since her birth. The prospect of seeing her, however, is too

painful and he declines Katie's invitation to come to her apartment for a drink. Mirroring the scene in the El Morocco club, Katie gently strokes Hubbell's hair and they embrace each other, as the film's recurrent sentimental musical motif plays out on the soundtrack. Ostensibly, both of them are back where they started in the late 1930s, but here the film's nostalgic tendencies contrast with images of Katie that have a strong contemporary resonance. As a consequence Hubbell's 'golden' aura has lost some of its sheen and the momentum of history appears to be with Katie. He is in a relationship with a pretty but rather bland, conservatively attired blond, and his ex-wife has returned to her activist roots, but has adopted a comparatively sophisticated modern style. Wearing her hair curly once again but more carefully coiffured, and dressed in a black roll neck and long camel coat, she recalls Angela Davis, the iconic black radical feminist whose alleged involvement in the murder of a Supreme Court judge became a cause celebre in the early 1970s, more so than a political radical of the 1950s (see Fig 4.3).[68] In this way, Katie's appearance connotes activity and autonomy in contrast to the passivity and conformity of Hubbell's new partner. In historical terms, this is the narrative's most recent point and deploying evocative visual signs it subtly undermines the popular view of 1950s cultural homogeneity and ideological conformity, and taps into contemporary discourses proclaiming the apparent 'decline of the Wasp' and 'rise of the un-meltable ethnics'. Such symbolic imagery is both an effective way of bridging the historical gap and proposing the ideological themes in the film are of relevance in the present, at the same time as articulating how the past is unavoidably processed through the prism of contemporary experience.

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[68] See Marc Olden, *Angela Davis: An Objective Assessment* (New York: Lancer Books, 1973).

Fig 4.3 Radical chic: Angela Davis and Barbra Streisand

Comparisons to and borrowings from black nationalist movements were not uncommon amongst Jewish Americans during the 1960s and 1970s, as the country's most successfully integrated ethnic group sought to affirm its distinctiveness within a society that at its basis was divided by a colour line. Historically, writes Goldstein, Jews are 'torn... by their twin desires to be "insiders" and "outsiders" in American culture', and the mimicking of Afro hair styles amongst the younger generation, for example, was one very visible way to assert the latter.[69] Similarly, in spite of the socio-economic success of Jewish Americans or their conflicted cultural identity, their history as a persecuted minority and strong intellectual traditions paralleled the pretensions of non-Jews wishing to distance themselves from the country's dominant culture at the time. Indeed, the ethno-cultural conflict in *The Way We Were* reflects an awareness of Schrag's observation that 'Jewishness has become fashionable'.[70] '[T]he Jew has become not only a symbol of "man's restlessness and wandering",' he writes, 'or of the

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[69] Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 214 + 216.

[70] Peter Schrag, *The Vanishing American* ([S.l.]: Gollancz, 1972), p. 109.

resilience that permits survival in a hostile environment, but also of the articulate outsider in an age when to be out is to be in'.[71] Schrag only begrudgingly cites the popularity of Streisand as an example of this phenomenon, echoing the opinion of many, mainly highbrow cultural commentators with an aversion to the brash surety of her persona and the type of mainstream entertainment that brought her fame.[72]

The Way We Were invites similar criticism, yet glossy superficiality and sentimental excesses notwithstanding, within the constraints of the film there is a real sense of progressive change in Katie's character. We learn she has a new husband who is also a great father to Hubbell's daughter, suggesting that this independent and empowered Jewish woman has found a satisfactory balance between her family life and her renewed political commitments. However, the independent motherhood Katie projects has to be placed in the context of the film's central narrative that results in her break-up with Hubbell, and, as such, is more of a concession to social change than a radical break with generic tradition. In other words, the film attempts to have it both ways, satisfying conservatives as well as progressives. These expectations are met because on one level it conforms to the central convention of the 'woman's film' genre in that Katie is forced to make a choice, although the reasons she makes it are obscured by Pollack's last minute edit. This choice is between marriage and domesticity on the one hand, represented as a matter of course by the vast majority of 'women's films' of Hollywood's studio era, and the irreconcilable desire for personal autonomy on the other. Generally, the former results in a happy ending and the latter in a sad ending; respectively affirmation and denial of the traditional values the genre promotes.

Echoing the accommodation of greater female freedom within the traditional generic parameters of the 'woman's film', the symbolism of the final scene is similarly

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[71] Ibid., p. 109

[72] See next section.

equivocal. This observation refers to the busy road separating Katie and Hubbell that they both in turn have to cross to speak to one another. Of course on one level this obstruction signifies their split, but it also has ambiguous socio-cultural connotations. On the one hand, their separation is an articulation of the shift from the integrationist ideals of the 1950s and 1960s to the cultural diversity of the 1970s conveyed by Katie's revised identity. On the other, it could be read as denoting that in spite of this shift and also because of it, American society largely remains an exclusive society separated along race, ethnic and class lines, a closing metaphor that dovetails with the film's reactionary nostalgia.

A flawed success: the marketing and reception of *The Way We Were*

By combining old fashioned romance, and social and political themes and content, *The Way We Were* aimed to have a broad audience appeal. The film's high box office returns and positive reviews in a range of different newspaper and magazine publications suggests it achieved this aim, but only up to a point. A roughly equal number of mixed and negative responses, mainly in middle and highbrow publications, highlighted its limited appeal for some sections of the cinemagoing public. These criticisms reflected differing priorities, with some arising from the compromised or contradictory nature of a film that aims to incorporate intelligent, sophisticated content into the traditional generic format of a romantic movie, and others, for example, from poor direction or editing. Equally, these responses indicate strategies designed to attract the highbrow audience segment were subordinated to satisfying the expectations and demands of the far more lucrative mainstream market, whose representative commentators, by contrast, did not voice similar concerns. Of course, a principal attraction for the film's mainstream, predominantly female, target audience was the chemistry and on-screen romance of Hollywood's biggest stars, Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford. The opinion of middle to highbrow critics, again, was far more mixed, particularly with

regards to Streisand, and whether her star image or Redford's enhanced or diminished the film's social, political and historical themes.

The mainstream women's magazines *Cosmopolitan* and *Fashion Week,* and the major female teen magazine *Seventeen*, were near unanimous in their praise for Pollack's film. The emphasis for the readership addressed by these reviews was firmly upon Redford, Streisand and the tale of star-crossed lovers. Conflict arising from the apparent incompatibility of the lead characters in romantic film narratives, who are attracted to each other in spite of personal or social differences, is a central convention of the genre, and the political and social issues are principally deployed in *The Way We Were* to achieve this end. However, for a genre not commonly associated with such content, these issues added a compelling depth that was unusual for a 'woman's film', but were nonetheless never allowed to become a focal point of the story. Pollack's last minute edit made sure of this, and that the reviews in these publications express little concern over the Red Scare narrative strand coming to an abrupt end and failing to reach a satisfactory resolution, suggests the director made the correct decision, at least with regards to the genre's traditional audience. Indeed, the needs and priorities of this market are reflected in the design of the advertising poster (see Fig 4.4). The attention grabbing headline in bold red capitals alongside an image of the two actors walking together along Malibu beach and above the title, firmly establishes the film as a romantic star vehicle, but communicates little about the actual story. The sense of wistful longing conveyed by the title itself, second in prominence to the star names, signals that it is a 'nostalgia' film. Finally, the tag-line on the right-hand side alludes to the central narrative conflict, and to the wider historical context the film takes in. Consonant with the film title, however, the handwritten style establishes that any wider context is subsidiary to that of personal history, which, judging from the elegance and sweeping energy of the script promises to captivate the viewer's attention through its passionate intensity.

Fig 4.4 Promotional poster for *The Way We Were*

The traditional female audience for Hollywood romance, moreover, was a neglected market, another factor accounting for the film's box office success. In recent years, in the wake of relaxed censorship and in response to changing socio-cultural attitudes, Hollywood had shifted its focus towards producing films that satisfied the appetite of its core, under-25 year old male audience for graphic sex, violence and drug taking.[73] *The Way We Were*, of course, was also responsive to changes in social attitudes. Katie is allowed to leave Hubbell and live on her own terms, for example, a level of female autonomy that the 'woman's films' produced during Hollywood's studio era would have suggested came at price, typically bringing unhappiness or sacrificing marriage and a family. However, like the treatment of the political themes in *The Way We Were*, this revision to the genre does not detract from the film's more timeless qualities, which

[73] Both reviewers in *Fashionweek* and *Seventeen* complained about Hollywood's preoccupation with sex, drugs and violence in recent years. See ''The Way We Were'', *Fashionweek*, 12 November 1973 [*The Way Were* microfiche/AMPAS] and ''The Way We Were'', *Seventeen*, November 1973 [*The Way Were* microfiche/AMPAS].

clearly evoke the romantic star vehicles of the past. 'Her lox-and-cream cheese of a Katie and his golden jock of a Hubbell are magnificent creations', writes *Fashion Week*, '- the kind of magic that still forms lines to see Garbo and Taylor, Gable and Harlow in their revivals.'[74] Similarly, the film's nostalgic imagery was akin to the 'warm glow of a memory', wrote *Cosmopolitan*, a visual sense that was entirely suited to this story of wistful longing and bittersweet love.[75] It proved an effective way to enhance the film's emotional pleasures, which were the priority of this audience segment. Nostalgia, moreover, corresponded more closely to the majority of people's engagement with historical events, such as the Second World War, which is through the prism of personal experience rather than the rational pursuit of objective 'truths'.[76]

Responses to *The Way We Were* amongst critics in the industry press and middle to highbrow publications, by comparison, were far more mixed. The majority acknowledged it was flawed, but opinion varied to what detriment these flaws were to the overall production. A major criticism from this section of the press was directed at the film's strong nostalgic tendencies, a principal source of pleasure for the readership of mainstream women's magazines. Stanley Kaufman's dismissal of the film as '[G] littery trash.... New Truth pasted on Old Cardboard' in the *New Republic*, reflected the view of a number of liberal-intellectual critics that this was an evasive and superficial production incompatible with any substantive attempt to address the political controversies of the 1950s, hitherto a subject dealt with only covertly in American film.[77] Pollack's film was the first overt treatment of the Red Scare in Hollywood, so expectations may have been high amongst some cinemagoers, particularly as since the

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[74] ''The Way We Were'', *Fashionweek.*

[75] 'Love Story', *Cosmopolitan*, December 1973 [*The Way Were* clippings/AMPAS].

[76] Surveys have shown that the intimate past (personal/family history) are far more important than the national past for the majority of Americans. But the two are often interrelated; the latter is often the setting for the former. See Roy Rosenzweig, and David P. Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[77] Stanley Kauffmann, 'The Way We Were', *The New Republic*, 10 November 1973, p. 32.

late 1960s they had been an increasing reliance on former taboos and controversies to excite the the interest of cinema's declining audience. By the early 1970s, however, many viewers had become over-accustomed to the 'shock of the new', or cynical about the exploitative or superficial manner which, in many cases, Hollywood approached such themes. The latter attitude was particularly true of the more politicised members of cinema's new audience. 'After all, what could be so dangerous now to mention the unmentionable in a movie?', was the wry response in *Ramparts*, the popular left-wing monthly, '[P]eople are tired of blacks, old indians, new indians, homosexuals, hippies, dope, bad cops and good robbers. What's left?'[78] Unsurprisingly for this reviewer the film's formerly unmentionable political content is not given the significance in the story that it warrants. Similarly, in *Rolling Stone*, the liberal bi-weekly newspaper covering music, politics and popular culture, the irony of a film whose style and perspective was directly at odds with its political theme was not lost on the magazine's reviewer: 'His [Pollack] glib account of selling out is only made more hollow by the typically Hollywood compromises so in evidence in his own film, beginning with the shoddy use of political blacklisting as mere fodder in a love story.'[79]

This observation also draws attention to the misleading emphasis in the poster tag-line - 'Everything seemed so important then...even love!' - when in fact the stylistic and editing choices made in the production of the film forms the impression that politics at least were not as important as this claim would have us believe. However, as the strong presentist tendencies of Hollywood historical film often come at the expense of 'authenticity' and balance, cinematic representations of the past are better understood as mediations of contemporary concerns. Yet, in turn, this understanding is informed by a knowledge of the wider historical context, in particular the recent past. Indeed, from the vantage point of 1973 this tag-line could equally be referring to the late 1960s. Had the

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[78] Judy Stone, '"The Way We Weren't"', *Ramparts*, vol. 12, no. 7 (February 1974), p. 49.

[79] 'The Way We Were', *Rolling Stone*, 6 November 1973 [*The Way We Were* microfiche/AMPAS].

film been released during this period, the up-swell in anti-establishment sentiment would have lent its political themes greater contemporary resonance. Because it was released some years later, however, after these sentiments had begun to wane, its evasive style and various obfuscations appear to more accurately express the temper of the times, the contradictory impulse to engage with, yet, at the same time, be at a remove from recent history. As the director himself observed the year after the film's release, with reference to his earlier socially conscious, gritty depression-era hit, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, America had undergone a marked change over the intervening period: 'The psychology of the Depression is a corollary to life in the '60s..... "Horses" would not do as well as it did in 1969 because the climate of the country in 1974 is different. People are less committed now. People are still lonely..... But the sense of unrest and social discontent has calmed down.'[80] The awareness of American audience's waning interest in politics in the early 1970s may have underpinned Pollack's decision to cut the section of the film that reveals how a difference of principles over the Hollywood blacklist led to Katie and Hubbell's separation.

Another much discussed facet of the film by this section of the press, was the casting and performance of its two leading stars. Significantly, a number of reviews dismissing *The Way We Were* for its nostalgic excesses and lack of authenticity, also disparaged Streisand. For these critics, the film's style and its female lead appeared to be synonymous. Moreover, mirroring the film's central character conflict, Streisand and Redford were broadly representative of two distinctive modes of acting, whose juxtaposition served to highlight the superiority of the latter; her brash, self-asserting style having been shaped by her formative years working in musicals and reminiscent of the theatrical acting style of Broadway or Hollywood's studio era, and his pensiveness and understatement hewing more closely to the naturalistic style popularised by Marlon

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[80] 'Film and History Interview with Sydney Pollack', *Film and History*, vol. 4, no. 2 (May 1974), p. 6.

Brando, Montgomery Clift and James Dean in the 1950s, and that became the vogue in the following decade. Streisand, wrote Stanley Kauffman, is 'still a monster.....an egotistic animal gobbling the story, the audience, the very film stock on which her image is printed'. But she cannot gobble up Redford, because he is 'a solid, subtle actor and a genuine star in his own right..... with an originality that comes from verity, not display.'[81] However, Kauffman's opinions were not shared by all the middle to high bow critics. On the contrary, a number expressed high praise for the performance of both actors.

Often a successful film, both in commercial and artistic terms, results from the balanced and harmonious relationship between strong component parts - script, direction, acting, casting, cinematography and so on. But there are also films that achieve popularity and distinction because the exceptional qualities of one or more of these components compensates to a significant extent for the disharmony or weaknesses of the others. To the *New Yorker*'s influential film critic, Pauline Kael, Pollack's film was an example of the latter, and its saving grace was star presence, the mainstream film's most potent asset. '*The Way We Were* is a fluke', she writes, 'a torpedoed ship full of gaping holes which comes snugly into port..... It stays afloat because of the chemistry of Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford.'[82]

Significantly, of the many flaws she lists the one she is compelled to elucidate upon is her view that the film's 'simplifications put the past in a phony perspective'. This she finds objectionable for two reasons; firstly, because it gives the misleading impression there is 'nothing between Communist commitment and smug indifference', and secondly because there were no other movies to compare this perspective against, as

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[81] Kauffman, 'The Way', p. 32.

[82] Pauline Kael, 'Three', *New Yorker*, 15 October 1973, *The Way We Were* clippings file, The Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

this was the first film explicitly dealing with the McCarthyite witch-hunt in Hollywood. Citing the damaging impact upon the garment industry when it was discovered Clark Gable did not wear an undershirt, at the time a staple of the male wardrobe, Kael argues the power of Hollywood to shape the consciousness of its audience should not be underestimated. With this in mind and furthermore because Hollywood movies are major source of historical knowledge for many people, the industry should exercise better judgement and aim to present a more balanced perspective on the past.[83]

Concerns over the distortion and simplification of history in film largely go unheeded in Hollywood because they are competing with the far stronger and often conflicting demand for the past to be presented in an understandable and exciting way. Yet Kael's criticism is part of a broader analytical point that reflects an astute understanding of film's distinctive qualities, and more specifically the importance of harnessing star potential. If this is successful, the viewer's cumulative knowledge of a star or stars, through a combination of prior screen performances and a variety of extra-textual discourses, converge with the roles they are playing and thus are a significant source of meaning. In Kael's view, the inherent qualities and contradictions of Streisand's and Redford's star personae neatly complemented their on-screen roles, bringing a level of complexity to an otherwise poorly constructed film. These observations furthermore support the view that the success of historical films is contingent upon the past being shaped to suit contemporary needs and attitudes.

Taking the opposing view to Kauffman, the *New Yorker* critic opines that the viewer is more likely to align herself with Katie because she stands for something and Hubbell does not, a standard distinction deployed by Hollywood to establish audience sympathy. Such a concise analysis, however, belies the character's underlying complexity. In the case of Katie, audience identification is not without ambivalence, a quality that can be

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[83] Ibid.

attributed to the screenplay, but is also amplified by Streisand's persona. 'She has caught the spirit of the hysterical Stalinist workhorses of the thirties and forties', Kael observes, 'both the ghastly desperation of their self-righteousness and the warmth of their enthusiasm.'[84] Interestingly, the character traits that provoked the likes of Kauffman to criticise the actress so strongly, were in large measure responsible for the success of her character. 'The tricky thing about the role of Katie Morosky,' notes Kael, 'is that Streisand must emphasise just that element in her own persona which repelled some people initially: her fast sass is defensive and aggressive in the same breath.' Conversely, the appeal of Redford, an actor and star who enjoys far more critical acclaim, in part can be explained by the way his persona obstructs empathy. Indeed, while 'Streisand has her miraculous audience empathy... Redford loses touch with us, but this is just as much what his personality and appeal are all about.'[85] The conventional heroism of his persona competes with opacity, skepticism and uncertainty, a contradictory quality that made him emblematic of a period during which America's dominant myths were subject to intense scrutiny yet proved themselves to be extremely resilient. In the context of *The Way We Were*, his persona serves as a bridge between two time periods, complementing a historical film that by turns nostalgically celebrates the nation's elite Wasp culture, and, paralleling contemporary cultural discourses, signals its apparent decline in the post-war era.

Conclusion

During the early 1970s, the success of *The Way We Were*, or *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Sting* (1973), for example, the top and second highest grossers in their respective years of release, demonstrate that the past was an important resource for the American film industry during a period of crisis and instability. Indeed, these and other films

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

exhibit a similar attitude and approach to its representation that proved remarkably responsive to the needs and desires of a broad section of American society. Historically, this had been the principal and most imperative aim of the American film industry and ensured healthy box office returns, but in recent years had been undermined by the increasing fragmentation of the audience. At its basis, this formula fed off and fueled the nostalgia wave in popular culture during the first half of the decade, an aesthetic impulse to return to or seek inspiration from 'simpler' times, that typically alluded to older cultural forms such as genre filmmaking from Hollywood's classical era. As such, these films catered to the needs of older, more conservative filmgoers, who felt affronted and alienated by the sensational and graphic depictions of sex, violence and drug-taking that had become a commonplace feature of mainstream filmmaking since the relaxation of censorship laws in the late 1960s.[86] This renewed enthusiasm for cinemagoing amongst the over-30 year olds, stimulated by the nostalgic recall of movies from their childhood, likely piqued the curiosity of some of their children too, presenting an opportunity to share in and understand their parents' formative movie experiences. The constant re-runs of old movies on national television since the early 1960s was another key factor explaining the popularity of the nostalgia film.[87] This facilitated high levels of 'cine-literacy', particularly amongst America's college-educated baby-boom generation, which could be put to the test by viewing early 1970s 'historical films'. But the appeal of these 'historical films', particularly for this demographic, also stemmed from how they broached topical concerns.[88]

In *The Way We Were*, as this chapter has shown, these concerns pertained to issues of cultural/ethnic diversity, social unity and egalitarianism, and the position the film

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[87] Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 263-6.

[88] Drew Casper, *Hollywood Film 1963-1976: Years of Revolution and Reaction* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 50-1

adopted on these issues, through its blend of star meaning, history, nostalgia, and genre, both in terms of its conventions and contemporary accommodations, is broadly centrist. Progressive values compete with dominant myths, and are tempered by the limits and difficulties of an integrated or cohesive society. Such a configuration, however, would have run the risk of putting off viewers on the 'left'. Indeed, while for this segment the film's political content was a key selling point, its superficial rendering of the Red Scare and reactionary aesthetic would have been considered major shortcomings by some viewers.[89] Likewise, that Katie is the only character that stands for something, may have irked some cinemagoers on the 'right'. This gives the skewed impression that moral integrity and political commitment are qualities that are somehow intrinsically left-wing, undermining the other pleasures likely to appeal to this segment, namely its traditional myths and classical conventions.[90] A further factor that may have affected audience responses was the unfolding 'Watergate' scandal, which, by the time *The Way We Were* hit American screens in autumn of 1973, writes Schulman, had become a 'national obsession'.[91] Paralleling the paranoid style of American government and other institutions during the McCarthyite period, one can speculate the scandal had a varying impact on the film's reception; adding pertinence to the political story as well as highlighting its inadequate representation, or, as an event commonly associated with the pervasive mood of disillusionment that descended over the national landscape during the 1970s, enhancing its warm and reassuring nostalgic elements.

Three years after the release of *The Way We Were*, the anti-communist crusade of the 1950s was the subject of another film in *The Front* (1976). Made by a number of former black-listees: director Martin Ritt, screenwriter Walter Bernstein, and the actors Zero Mostel, Herschel Bernardi and Lloyd Gough, the film was about blacklisting in the

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[89] See, for example, 'The Way We Were', *Rolling Stone*.

[90] For a right-wing defence of nostalgia see Jeffrey St. John, The Nostalgia Backlash, *The New York Times*, 7 April 1971, www.nytimes.com.

[91] Schulman, *The Seventies*, p. 46.

television industry and aroused a similar debate over the relative value of political themes in the medium of movie entertainment. This time it was the conventions of comedy as opposed to the 'nostalgia film' that were considered inappropriate to the treatment of such a serious subject, as the focus of much of the film is upon Howard Prince, played by Woody Allen to hilarious effect, who is a small time book-keeper turned 'front' for a number of banned television writers. Prince is apolitical and his primary motivation for accepting this role is money. He is also self-absorbed and his increasing 'success' as a fraudulent screenwriter flatters his vanity and makes him desirable in the eyes of an attractive assistant producer. At the film's end, however, when it is alleged he has been engaged in subversive activities, he is nobly redeemed by refusing to co-operate with the investigative committee. For the most part the film's political themes are dealt with obliquely within its generic format, and are conveyed through the plight of individual characters as opposed to an examination of the ideological conflicts of the period. By personalising these themes and sugaring them with humour the intention is to enhance audience receptiveness to the film's 'message'. For some critics, however, this approach merely glossed over the important issues, but others argued that the film was a success in this respect, particularly through the character of Hecky Brown played by Mostel, a tragic figure compelled to take his own life after his career as a television comedian is destroyed by the blacklist. 'It may be faulted for oversimplification', wrote David Canby in *The New York Times*. 'Yet even in its comic moments "The Front" works on the conscience. It recreates the awful noise of ignorance that can still be heard.'[92] In any case, the extent to which a film about the black-list had the potential to outrage the American public by the mid-1970s was open to question. By virtue of the fact Hollywood were making films about the post-Second World War Red Scare in the entertainment industries indicated that it was a controversy sufficiently softened by time. Indeed, when CBS expressed a strong interest in buying

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[92] Vincent Canby, 'Screen: Woody Allen Is Serious in 'Front'', *The New York Times*, 1 October 1976 [*The Front* microfiche/AMPAS].

the film for television, the main reason given, Ritt recalled, was because 'it deals with a subject that is now comfortably historical.'[93]

[93] Thomas Meehan, 'Woody Allen in a Comedy About Blacklisting? Don't Laugh?', *The New York Times*, 7 December 1975 [*The Front* clippings/AMPAS].

Chapter 5: *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Grease* (1978): the 'Fifties' as Myth and Comment

Nostalgia was a dominant tendency in American popular culture of the 1970s. More accurately, this was chiefly nostalgia for the recent past, and in particular for the 1950s. At its basis this was a conservative tendency that presented a simplified and idealised view of the era as one of youthful innocence, social stability, economic security and global dominance, and was the inspiration for a significant number of 'Fifties' films. Aesthetically, it has its roots in the era's distinctive commodity culture and teen rock 'n' roll subculture.[1] The two most emblematic and commercially successful films from this classification - *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Grease* (1978) - are the subject of this chapter, which accounts for the significance of these two representations of the 1950s with audiences in the 1970s. The in-depth comparative analysis of these films, extending from their production to reception, will situate them within the broader phenomenon of the Fifties, and is informed by the view that the legitimacy and popularity of nostalgia for this era principally stems from its oppositional relationship to the social upheaval and public traumas of the 1960s.[2] The films' mediation of concerns pertaining to key issues and developments in the 1970s are also given due emphasis.

American Graffiti was the surprise critical and commercial hit of the year, and is one of the most profitable investments a Hollywood studio has ever made, costing around

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[1] Christine Sprengler uses the term Populuxe which 'marries 'populism', 'popularity' and 'luxury' to describe the material objects produced between 1954 and 1964, a materialistic 'golden age''. See Christine Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), p. 42.

[2] Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), pp. 2 and 9-10.

$750,000 to make and returning a domestic film rental of over $55 million.[3] The film was co-written and directed by the 28 year old 'movie brat' George Lucas, a graduate of the film program at the University of Southern California (USC), and is loosely based upon his experiences as teenager growing up in a small town in California in the 1950s and early 1960s. With his bold stylistic approach to filmmaking and the thematic parallels between *American Graffiti* and his first full length feature, *THX 1138* (1971), Lucas was considered one of the Hollywood's new wave of young 'auteurs'.[4] The second, the musical *Grease*, by contrast, won far fewer critical plaudits, but nevertheless capitalised both on the popularity of the long running Broadway stage production and its star actor John Travolta. Directed by Randy Kleiser, it was the the top box office hit of 1978, making over $96 million in domestic film rentals, and exemplifies the new industry paradigm of intensively advertised and cross-marketed big budget event movies, or blockbusters, that was established at the end of the decade.[5] Both films draw their inspiration from the popular 'teen movies' of the late 1950s and early 1960s, but in keeping with another dominant tendency in 1970s filmmaking are self-conscious 'genre' pictures; *American Graffiti* with its humourous yet subtly mannered style, and *Grease*'s gentle parody of its generic forebears. Similarly, both are set in 'middle class' suburbia, and centre upon the subculture and mating rituals of 1950s teenagers as they cruise in cars, go to the diner, and dance at the 'sock hop' to a rock and roll soundtrack; all central signifiers of the Fifties. There are important distinctions to be drawn, however, both in terms of their thematic, stylistic and commercial strategies, and how

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[3] This claim is based on the film's over fifty to one investment to profit ratio. See William Baer, 'An Interview with Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz', *Creative Screenwriting,* vol. 6, no. 1 (February 1999), p. 38. The rental figure is from Appendix 12 of David A Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002), p. 499.

[4] See Roger Greenspun, 'American Graffiti', *The New York Times*, 13 August 1973, www.nytimes.com. First advanced in the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* critics in mid-1950s, the notion of an authorial 'voice' in the recurrence of style and theme across a director's oeuvre, or the auteur theory, influenced the critical perspective of many American film commentators writing in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, it was a conceptual approach of significant utility, not only for film criticism, but also for Hollywood advertising and marketing departments seeking to attract America's increasingly cine-literate audience to the movies.

[5] Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 501.

these contrasting representations pertained to contemporary concerns. Whereas *American Graffiti*'s 'authenticity', theme of 'change' and ambivalent nostalgia, resonated deeply with America's baby boom age generation, *Grease*, by contrast, lacks historicity and reinforces myth, assimilating the working class greaser into the suburban middle class as a metaphor for the greater latitude in social and sexual conduct, and personal self expression, across American society at the end of the 1970s.

The 1970s nostalgia boom

Lucas' film had been released during the early 1970s 'nostalgia boom', and was viewed within the context of this contemporary cultural phenomenon. Indeed, what had emerged as a number of cultural fads in the late 1960s based on the style, fashion and customs of previous decades, at the beginning of the 1970s burgeoned into a general craze. Nostalgia was circulated in music, film, theatre, television, fashion, print media and advertising, and shifted emphasis from the 1920s and 1930s, to the 1940s and 1950s.[6] But it soon became evident that nostalgia for the latter decade, or the 'Fifties', was its dominant strain, proving more popular and outlasting that of any other period. In 1971, *The Last Picture Show* and *Two-Lane Black Top* were the first of around thirty 1950s films released over the course of the decade, and *Grease* opened in a neighbourhood theatre in Chicago.[7] Signaling the era's popular appeal, the following year an eight page cover story in *Life* magazine, 'The Nifty Fifties', proclaimed the 'Wacky revival of Hula Hoops, Ducktails, Sock hops, the Marilyn Monroe look, Rock n' Roll and Elvis himself.'[8]

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[6] Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2000), p. 71.

[7] Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, p. 43.

[8] 'The Nifty Fifties', *Life*, vol. 72, no. 23 (16 June 1972), pp. 38-46.

This article and others published in the early 1970s also provided analysis, explaining both the causal factors that gave rise to this phenomenon and discussing its wider implications. The consensus amongst commentators was that the prevalence of nostalgia in American popular culture at the time was symptomatic of the nation's recent and current public traumas, namely the Vietnam War, political assassinations, racial and political unrest, the economic recession and Watergate scandal. Commenting on the Fifties craze sweeping through America's university campuses in the early 1970s, Phillip Zimbardo, a social psychologist at Stanford, observed: 'Today's youth are threatened by an uncertain future, alienated from traditional values and turned off by the hypocrisy and violence they see around them. So they trip out on the past they can relate to and which they can control.'[9] However, broadly reflecting ideological differences, there was less agreement over the 'meaning' of nostalgia; the implications of bringing this type of perspective on the past to bear upon the concerns of the present. Expressing the liberal-progressive position, Michael Silverman wrote in *Intellect*: 'Nostalgia is history's soft substitute, and expresses both longing for something denied and an inability to fathom origins except devitalisation or hand-me-down myths. It abrogates thoughtful analysis, and depends on a mannered sensitivity to presumed forms and gathered ways of life.'[10] On the Right, by contrast, Jeffrey St. John, argued that the 'irrational despair of modern art-forms' had fueled 'a growing movement towards the sense of romantic and the heroic....in search of rational philosophical foundations.' 'Nostalgia', he contends,'is not the urge to escape to simpler more complete past... but 'to seek new inspiration from the old'.'[11] Mainstream commentators were more ambivalent. 'Nostalgia selects only what is agreeable', argued Clarke in the moderately conservative *Time*, 'and even that it distorts or turns into myth.' He adds, '[Y]et the fantasy of homesickness, which is the meaning of today's nostalgia craze, cannot be

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[9] Andrew H. Malcom, 'Students Revive Good Old 1950s', *The New York Times*, 17 May 1971, *The New York Times* online archive (www.nytimes.com).

[10] Michael Silverman, 'The Uses of Cinematic History', *Intellect*, vol.10, no. 2 (January 1975), p. 241.

[11] Jeffrey St. John, 'The Nostalgia Backlash', *The New York Times*, 7 April 1971, www.nytimes.com.

dispelled with churlish facts and disagreeable reasons. If it gives a little pleasure in an otherwise unpleasurable year, why even try?'[12]

As we shall see, in contrast to these conflicting critical responses to the 1970s nostalgia boom, *American Graffiti* provoked a markedly different response, and elicited near unanimous praise amongst the nation's film reviewers for its complex and contradictory qualities. Indeed, while it contains a great deal of arresting and evocative nostalgic imagery, Lucas' film is simultaneously ambivalent or 'anti-establishment', owing to its visual construction, its observational style, and, crucially, the specificity of its historical setting. Significantly, however, amongst the minority of dissenting voices, were a number of female critics whose criticisms highlighted a gender imbalance in the film in its narrow emphasis upon the experiences of its four white male protagonists.

American Graffiti: the nostalgia film as 'collective spiritual autobiography'[13]

Lucas co-wrote *American Graffiti* with the husband and wife screenwriting team Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz, and after the screenplay was finished he spent a year unsuccessfully attempting to secure a deal in Hollywood. Studio executives were reluctant to make a film that did not feature any stars and was about a teenage subculture few of them understood. The situation changed, however, when Lucas' friend Francis Ford Coppola became involved in the project. Coppola was the executive producer on Lucas' first feature, the dystopic science fiction thriller *THX1138* (1971). After directing the critical and commercial super-hit, *The Godfather* (1972), Coppola's stock was high in Hollywood, and his decision to produce *American Graffiti* proved to be a decisive endorsement, helping Lucas clinch a deal with Universal. Another

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[12] Gerald Clarke, 'The Meaning of Nostalgia', *Time*, 3 May 1971, www.time.com/time/archive.

[13] Charles Champlin, 'A New Generation Looks Back in Graffiti', *Los Angeles Times*, 29 July 1973, *American Graffiti* microfiche, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverley Hills, California.

important collaborator was Lucas' friend and highly esteemed cinematographer Haskell Wexler. The film was shot over four weeks almost entirely at night on location, and a few days into the shoot Lucas decided to call on his services after the two cameramen he had hired could not find the visual style he wanted. Both men shared a passion for race cars, and had met when Lucas was working as a mechanic and photographer, before he attended USC. The film was shot in Techniscope (widescreen), a format Wexler disliked due to the grainy effect it produced, but nevertheless he agreed to come to Lucas's aid, and devised the production's distinctive 'jukebox' lighting style.[14]

Fig 5.1 Mel's drive-in

American Graffiti is a coming of age story set in the town of Modesto, Northern California, in 1962. Humourous in style and consisting of a series of vignettes, the film interlaces the experiences of four male friends over the course of a summer's night. Similar to other teen films its focus is upon adolescent mating rituals and identity, and, as such, it contains many of the familiar features or signifiers of 'Fifties' nostalgia. But as well as providing a warm, affectionate and familiar portrait of adolescent fun, rebellion, lust and longing, it also offers a subtle and poignant reflection on both the

[14] Two articles detailing the production of *American Graffiti*: Larry Sturhan, 'The Filming of 'American Graffiti': An Interview with Director George Lucas', *Filmmakers Newsletter*, vol. 7, no. 5 (May 1974), pp. 19-27, and Stephen Farber, 'George Lucas: The Stinky Kid Hits the Big Time', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 3 (Spring 1974), pp. 2-9.

listlessness of a subculture that by the early 1960s had reached its apogee, and the limits and constraints of small town life.

At the film's end, it is apparent only the intelligent and sensitive high school graduate Curt (Richard Dreyfuss) will escape the film's 'closed world' of the Fifties. He has a scholarship from the town's 'Moose Lodge' and flies out the following day to start college in the east of the country, but only after the encouraging words from one of his teachers, and the legendary local dee jay Wolfman Jack, have helped him overcome his initial reluctance to leave. The narrative conceit of a beautiful, mysterious and elusive blond in a white Thunderbird whom Curt sights cruising on the strip early in the film, and then again from the plane window at the end, is a device used to express his dilemma; should he stay in Modesto, attend the local college and try meet the object of his desire, or does she a symbolise the need to broaden his horizons and gain new experiences?[15] Class president Steve (Ron Howard) is also college bound, and in contrast to Curt is looking forward to leaving his adolescent, small town existence behind, admonishing his wavering friend that he 'can't stay seventeen forever'. But by the next morning events and circumstances have given Steve reason to change his mind. He is a 'straight-arrow' type but nonetheless suggests to his girlfriend and head cheerleader Laurie that they should date other people whilst he is away at college. This suggestion upsets her and after she decides to put it into practice by disappearing into the night with another boy, Steve is driven to a fit of jealousy and sets about tracking her down. The prospects for the other two major male characters appear far more limited and the impression is that Modesto is where they will live out their adult lives. The tough but affable hot-rodder, John's (Paul Le Mat) dedication in life is chasing girls and to maintain his unbeaten record racing his custom car, but he is becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of his small town existence and is uncertain as to what the future may hold. He is a few years older than the other characters and

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[15] Sturhan, 'The Filming of 'American Graffiti'', p. 25.

complains to Curt that ‘the whole strip is shrinking’, and when he comes up against a faster car that has a near fatal crash at the end of the film, he is reminded that he cannot remain ‘number one’ forever, and if he was to try to do so, he may end up paying the ultimate price. This sequence recalls the iconic ‘Chicken Run’ race in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and John’s persona rather toothlessly references another potent signifier of the Fifties, James Dean.[16] The awkward and bespectacled Terry (Charles Martin Smith), nicknamed ‘Toad’, is the archetypal high school ‘geek’. He is full of enthusiastic reverence for his friends and their cars, but is himself a figure of fun to other characters in the film. But after he is entrusted with Steve’s prized Chevrolet Impala, he manages to defy expectations and spends the night with Debbie, an attractive blond.

The wide acclaim *American Graffiti* received in the press, particularly amongst middle and highbrow critics, contrasted with the often critical or indifferent responses to other nostalgia films in the nation’s press.[17] Whereas many of these movies were regarded as superficial or frivolous representations of earlier eras, Lucas’ film, by comparison, was admired for its subtle and complex engagement with the past that intelligently blurred the distinctions between nostalgia, history and memory, and constituted a critique of nostalgia itself. Indeed, noting the surface markers of Fifties nostalgia - the music, cars, clothes etc - this was a film that 'lures with pleasures of nostalgia, then twists them into something more interesting', wrote Joseph Kanon in *The Atlantic Monthly*.[18]

Much of the film’s impact was attributed to its textual construction and the creative input of its various contributors. But its extraordinary cultural resonance with

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[16] For analysis of the cultural meaning of James Dean, along with Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe in the early 1970s, see Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 17.

[17] David Brudnoy, for examples, makes a favourable comparison between *American Graffiti* and the ‘slick, crass and prettied up’ nostalgia film, *Class of '44* (1973). See David Brudnoy, "So Long, Miss American Pie," *National Review*, 9 November 1973, p.1251.

[18] Joseph Kanon, ‘On the Strip’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1973, p. 125.

contemporary audiences, as many critics noted, was also derived from the year that frames narrative events.[19] 'Where were you in '62', the tag-line on the poster adverts and repeated three times on the movie trailer, invites spectators to cast their mind back not simply to a past era but a specific year. 1962 marks the end of the '1950s' as a historical era, as opposed to a chronological decade, and the implications of this date for the baby boom cohort watching the film in the early 1970s were complex.

Fundamentally, the Fifties is defined in opposition to the received view of the 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, in the main it is inspired by the experiences of white, middle class teenagers, and, as such, invokes the 1950s as a time of 'youth, innocence and security', before adulthood and the profound social trauma, political turbulence and economic uncertainty of the subsequent period.[20] Although *American Graffiti* contains some working class characters, namely the greasers John and a local gang, The Pharoahs, it presents the white, middle class view and its attendant meaning through its suburban setting and emphasis on the the experiences of Curt and Steve. Aside from its roots in black music and culture, the origins of the wider teenage rock and roll phenomenon can be traced to the subculture of the white working class greaser. By the mid-1970s the greaser had become a central trope of the Fifties, and will be discussed in depth in the analysis of *Grease* and its contemporary reception in the second part of this chapter. Of course, another important factor that accounts for the pre-eminence of the Fifties was that for many moviegoers in the early 1970s it was extremely personal, unlike nostalgia for earlier decades. It re-presented the childhood and youth of a large proportion of the country's baby-boom generation and many young pre-baby boomers, two demographic groups that made up a substantial segment of cinema audiences at the time. Significantly, however, the popularity of *American Graffiti* cut across age groups.[21]

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[19] See, for example: Champlin, 'A New Generation'.

[20] Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 10.

[21] Sturhan, 'The Filming of 'American Graffiti'', p. 24.

Indeed, that the film was rated highly by older spectators who did not participate in 1950s teen culture but were perhaps more aware of how the decade had been mythified in popular culture, through the effacement of McCarthyism, for example, attests to its the accuracy and sophistication.[22] It was the proximity of the 1950s to the present, coupled with Lucas' ability to imbue the film with the authenticity of his own personal recollections that enabled the director, wrote Kanon, to 'evoke not a public era, but a private one - they're not props in a historical drama - we are still to close to the fifties for that - but tangible bits of experience.'[23]

Yet the significance of the summer of 1962 was the *impending* historical drama, noted many of the reviews. It was around the mid-point of John F. Kennedy's presidency and retrospectively frames the personal dimension of the film with the future shock of his calamitous assassination in November of the following year, the first public trauma of the 1960s. His election two years earlier was a momentous occasion for millions of Americans, particularly for those from the younger generation. Young, good-looking, intelligent and charismatic, the new democratic president had the aura of a Hollywood movie star, and inspired millions of Americans with his soaring rhetoric promising to bring change and renewed vitality to American democracy, after the ideological complacency and cultural stasis of the Eisenhower era. In 1962 expectations were still high, or, to be more precise, from the vantage point of 1973 the 'age of Kennedy was at once beginning and ending', as one critic noted, and with this extra-textual knowledge comes a greater degree of ambiguity.[24] In this way, the film's historical setting by turns is identified with the sense of optimism and change that attended America's new administration, and anticipates the near future, namely the intimate relationship between the baby boom generation and the social and political trauma of the decade, an

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[22] See Stanley Kauffmann, 'Stanley Kauffmann on Films', *The New Republic*, 10 November 1973, pp. 22 and 33.

[23] Kanon, 'On the Strip', p. 125.

[24] Champlin, 'A New Generation'.

experience that by the early 1970s had triggered a wistful longing for the apparent simplicity and security of the Fifties.

This relationship led to a radical re-shaping of American youth culture, a parallel shift the film anticipates too. Music is of course a central component of any subculture, and especially for the baby-boomers in the audience, the 41 original rock and roll songs that make up the soundtrack were the viewers' most instant and evocative connection with the period. Beyond musical style, rock and roll shaped the lifestyle, language, fashion, and attitudes of America's youth, into a unique subcultural identity and expression of rebellion. Yet, although the distinctive sounds of rock and roll had the potential to bring the memories flooding back for those who participated in 1950s youth culture, it was nevertheless by 1962 approaching the end of an era.[25] For those in the audience who lived through this period, the film's historical context likely injected a note of ambivalence into the experience of listening to the soundtrack. The history and memories of the subsequent period, and the baby-boomer's explicit rejection of the conventional social norms and ideological conservatism of their parent's generation, complicates this experience further. Indeed, as the 1960s progressed, a generation gap opened up over a range of interrelated issues, including the Vietnam War, sexual mores, race relations, women's rights, and the equation of material success with the American Dream. Anti-establishment feeling and the spirit of nonconformity was particularly strong amongst the country's student population, and led to the rise of the New Left and the anti-war movement. It was also manifested in the emergence of the 1960s 'counterculture'. The popularity of long hair and simple clothing made from natural fibres with countercultural youth, or 'hippies', signified material poverty and the rejection of America's culture of acquisition. 'Although these hallmarks of the counterculture were not embraced by all young people in the 1960s by any means', notes Daniel Marcus, 'the breadth of change along several axes of lifestyle and

[25] Kanon, 'On the Strip', p. 125.

identity..... created a sense of widespread change.'[26] Music changed significantly too, and the improvisational and experimental psychedelic rock that became popular during the decade, made the rock and roll music of the previous era sound quaintly outmoded.[27] Watching and listening to *American Graffiti* in 1973 therefore contradictorily evoked an impulse to retrieve the comparatively innocuous youth rebellion of the Fifties, and acknowledges that 1950s rock and roll was soon to become culturally irrelevant.

The uniquely dialogical experience of watching the film was much lauded by the critics, strongly suggesting it resonated most deeply with viewers of a certain age who had a 'collective' sense of the 'lived' history the narrative invoked. Criticism of the film's ending appears to support this observation. By turns ironic, optimistic, tragic and predictable, a postscript informs us of the fate of each of the four protagonists. We learn that John was killed by a drunk driver in 1964, Terry the Toad was reported missing in action in Vietnam, Steve is an insurance agent in Modesto, and Curt is a writer living in Canada. A number of mainly liberal-intellectual commentators argued the postscript was too pat and closed off what was a enjoyably open narrative.[28] The film's open, observational style was indeed integral to its success, allowing its contemporary audience to invest the story with personal experience of both the 'late 1950s' suburban milieu depicted, and the extraordinary socio-political turbulence of the 1960s. The personal fate of Terry is the film's only explicit link between the two periods, and, with the Vietnam War still an inescapable and catastrophic reality in 1973, perhaps some viewers at the time did not need reminding of the impact it had had on American's lives. But for audiences watching the film in the contemporary period this information serves

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[26] Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 10.

[27] Ibid., p. 11.

[28] See Robert Hatch, 'Films', *Nation*, 24 September 24, p. 283.

as a useful historical marker, that evokes a sense of the movie's underlying complexity peculiar to viewing it in the early 1970s.

Another important contextual factor was the timing of the movie's release. This came at the end of the 'nostalgia boom', and consequently Lucas' film was compared and contrasted with the wave of early 1970s movies that although commercially successful were routinely criticised by many reviewers. A glowing write-up in the *National Review* noted how it steered clear of the 'slick, crass and prettied-up imitation of reality' in the *Class of '42* (1973), the sequel to the hit nostalgia movie *The Summer of '42* (1971), for example.[29] Indeed, in a similar fashion to the chronological signposting in the advertising for the film, such positive comparisons served to highlight and enhance the text's ambiguous relationship to the Fifties. More broadly these ambiguities were inferred as a subtle critique of the tendency to sentimentalise and simplify the past in the recent wave of Hollywood nostalgia films, a tendency, it was argued, that limited critical potential. Lucas' film, by contrast, kept the audience at a emotional distance and encouraged more active engagement. The director's fondness for the youth culture of the 1950s is self-evident, and the film provides many of the conventional pleasures of the Fifties. Yet it also reflected his interest in anthropology and sociology, as indicated by the 'folk art' connotations of the film's title: 'I'm very interested in America and why it is what it is. I was always fascinated by the cultural phenomenon of cruising, that whole teenage mating ritual. It's really more interesting than primitive Africa or ancient New Guinea-and much, much weirder.'[30]

The film's humourous screenplay and loose, episodic structure helps effect a balance between conventional screen entertainment and the notion of observable cultural behaviour. Visually, a detached view of suburban teenage culture is fostered by the

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[29] Brudnoy, 'So Long'.

[30] See Sturhan, 'The Filming of 'American Graffiti'', p. 19, and Farber, 'George Lucas', p. 6.

'realistic abstraction' of Haskell Wexler's cinematography.[31] The decision to shoot 'night for night' lends the film much of its realism. So too does the 'worldizing' of the soundtrack. This highly innovative approach to re-recording the music is the work of the sound recordist and editor Walter Murch, and gives the impression it was recorded 'live' within the film's various and changing environments, such as the inside of a car or cars passing each other on the street.[32] Crucially, however, the verisimilitude promoted by these elements is undercut by the film's lighting and format. Wexler's lighting strategy involved accentuating the cast of carbon arc and fluorescent lighting, a key signifier of the Fifties youth milieu, illuminating the characters' faces from lights attached to the car dashboards, and combining cold blue light with the warmth of red and yellow light. Described by the cinematographer as 'juke-box like', the film's garish aesthetic, noted one reviewer, 'renders his (Lucas') midsummer's night dream with a certain nightmarish quality.'[33] Lucas' decision to shoot the film in 'Techniscope' added a further self-reflexive note. The visible graininess achieved by this widescreen process gave it the feel of the popular low-budget teen movies produced by American International Pictures between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, such as *Shake, Rattle and Rock* (1956) and *Beach Party* (1963). 'This allows Lucas to mock, carefully and compassionately, the conventions and stereotypes of a genre as well as a generation', observed Jay Cocks writing in *Time*.[34] Moreover, it is a stylistic device that both draws attention to the way cinema mediates conceptions of history and suggests the unstable nature of personal memory.[35]

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[31] Kauffmann, 'Stanley Kauffmann on Films', p. 22.

[32] Sturhan, 'The Filming of 'American Graffiti'', p. 27.

[33] Colin L. Westerbeck Jnr, 'The Screen: The American Dream', *Commonweal*, 5 October 1973, p. 13.

[34] Jay Cocks, 'Fabulous '50s', *Time*, 20 August 1973, www.time.com/time/archive.

[35] The practice of producing 'new-old films' that summon the 'memories of media forms' is characterised by film scholar Marc Le Suer as 'deliberate archaism'. Quoted in Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia,* pp. 83-86.

A continuity of theme was noted by Roger Greenspun in *The New York Times*, between *American Graffiti* and Lucas' first feature film *THX 1138*. The earlier film is 'about a closed, tranquilized future society, controlled by mysterious broadcast voices, and from which there is almost no escape', he writes, and the latter which 'really presents the obverse of that world—now beneficent, familiar; but also closed, tuned in to mysterious voices, and offering almost no means of escape.'[36] The chief symbol in this paradoxically 'closed world' is the car. The car, moreover, is not only 'an enormously complex symbol in America', as Lucas asserts, but is also the most compelling visual signifier of the Fifties.[37] Indeed, Lucas and Wexler, both custom car enthusiasts, imbue the large and elaborately designed 1950s cars with a dream-like resonance, as they cruise the strip at night, reflecting neon light in their polished bodywork. Coupled with the soundtrack, the film's focus upon the movement and visual allure of the cars prompted many commentators to describe the film as an 'automotive ballet'.[38] This is framed as an ambiguous pleasure at the film's end, however, with the 'perfect epiphany' of the plane Curt departs upon, noted Jon Landau, writing in *Rolling Stone*. 'For it naturally suggests the wider world to explore as well as the pain of leaving childhood..... Seen in that light, Lucas' beloved cars, for so much of the film a token of youthful adventure and exploration, suddenly become symbols of small town confinement and entrapment.'[39]

At the same time this contradictory symbolism implicates the youthful experiences of the protagonists, and by extension the audience, in the twin projects of American consumer capitalism and Cold War ideology during the 1950s. Indeed, as Christine Sprengler has demonstrated, the Fifties is not a construct solely contemporaneous to the

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[36] Greenspun, 'American Graffiti'.

[37] Sturhan, 'The Filming of American Graffiti', p. 20.

[38] Jon Landau, '"American Graffiti: A Sixties Novella"', *Rolling Stone*, 13 September 1973, *American Graffiti* clippings file/AMPAS. See also Kauffmann, 'Stanley Kauffmann', p. 22.

[39] Landau, '"American Graffiti"'.

late 1960s and early 1970s, but has its ideological roots in the intensive self-mythologising processes of the earlier era. This additional and important historical factor distinguishes it from other types of nostalgia, and helps account both for its popularity and the complicated critical responses to Lucas' film. Sprengler notes the causal connection between consumerism's unprecedented growth in the 1950s and the increase in size and affluence of America's middle class, but also demonstrates how it was fueled by the co-operative enterprise of government, business and the media investing consumer culture with resonant meaning, namely the myth of the American Dream. Often resembling one another, television advertisements and domestic sitcoms were integral to the production of meaning, she observes, focussed as they were on projecting a 'glorified reality' of white, suburban middle class family life. Within this idealised construct were foregrounded consumer items, such as the latest kitchen appliances, for instance, whose desirability was enhanced by the characters or character types with whom the viewer identified or made emotional connections.[40] These items, furthermore, were designed to attract attention. 'On postwar automobiles', writes Sprengler, 'rocket-like tail fins signified the futurity, expansionism and technological supremacy central to post-war ideology. The automobiles size and superfluous accessories signified ostentation, prosperity and conspicuous consumption, while constantly exaggerated design elements ensured planned obsolescence.'[41] Reflecting the mainstream appeal popularity of Fifties nostalgia during the 1970s, the television sitcoms *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963), were two of the decade's most popular syndicated reruns.[42]

The use of visual signifiers in conjunction with the narrative, stylistic and thematic strategies in *American Graffiti*, then, was implicitly oppositional, a reading that is

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[40] Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, pp. 48-58.

[41] Ibid., p. 57.

[42] Ibid., p. 45.

reflected in many of the contemporaneous reviews, both high and middle brow. The central metaphor of the car, for example, not only refers to the illusion of limitless possibilities associated with youth, but also alludes to the mythical nature of the American Dream, which also dovetailed with the film's central theme of 'change'. In other words, as the 1960s progressed, attitudes towards this national ideal began to change, especially amongst the country's young, college educated baby boomers, who increasingly viewed the American Dream critically, as a metaphor of material excess, and as a myth that holds out the false promise that opportunity and success were available to all, irrespective of social, ethnic or racial background. This perceptual shift opened up one of the major generational fault-lines of the decade and was a catalyst for violent unrest, yet did not engender viable or coherent alternative ideals. This outcome informs the film's divided attitude towards the Fifties, which simultaneously registers the disruption of the nation's dominant myth at the same time as it provides the signifiers of myth that in the 1970s function to efface this disruption.

Although *American Graffiti* was undoubtedly a critical success, there were a handful of dissenting voices in the nation's press. Significantly, two of these were female reviewers whose major complaint was against the film's strong male bias. *The New Yorker*'s eminent movie critic Pauline Kael argued the film's ending, which outlines the fate of the four male protagonists, as a 'cold slap' for women, because it makes no reference to the film's female characters.[43] These characters, furthermore, are derived from narrow stereotypes; Laurie, who is solely interested in 'holding... Steve in town', and the 'garish, overdrawn blond swinger' Debbie, for example.[44] Ambition is gendered male; none of the female characters are considering attending college, the principal means of escaping the confines of small town life. The energy and intelligence of actress Cindy

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[43] Pauline Kael, 'Current Cinema', *The New Yorker*, 29 October 1973, p. 154. In his interview with Larry Sturhan, Lucas acknowledged the validity of Kael's criticism; see Sturhan, 'The Filming of 'American Graffiti'', p. 22

[44] Kael, 'Current Cinema', p. 155.

Williams' performance partly succeeds in off-setting Laurie's limitations, but she is also reinforces a common theme in American films of the early 1970s, characterised by Frank Tomasulo as 'women (that) stand in the way of the male protagonist'.[45] Indeed, the film's chauvinism is inherent in the impression that success for women is principally equated with marriage. After Laurie has narrowly escaped death in the race between Paul and his challenger, she falls into Steve's arms, a sequence that strongly anticipates this outcome.[46]

Moreover, not only did the film display a gender bias, it was noted, but it focused upon the white middle class experience. Many positive reviews found much in the film to consider it a subtle and effective critique of this type of nostalgia, but Kael argued that in spite of its creative strengths, it ultimately fails to transcend its nostalgic trappings and provide any meaningful insights into either the past or present. In other words, the film evaded uncomfortable historical realities pertaining to class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, as well as gender. 'For whom was it "just like that" I wonder,' wrote Kael. 'Not for women, not for blacks or Orientals or Puerto Ricans, not for homosexuals, not for the poor.'[47] That Lucas drew upon his own memories of growing up in suburban California mitigates this type of criticism. Furthermore, inasmuch as the film indicates the racial, ethnic and class segmentation of American society, it is an authentic representation, not only in 1962, but at the time of the film's release too. Equally, however, as the nation's social inequities had been pushed to the forefront of public discourse in the preceding period, by the activities of consciousness movements such as Civil Rights and Women's Liberation, it is understandable that Lucas' film was criticised for its narrow purview. It is also significant that none of the positive reviews,

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[45] Frank P. Tomasulo, '1976: Movies and Cultural Contradictions, in Lester D. Friedman (ed.), *American Cinema of the 1970s: Themes and Variations*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 178.

[46] Bervele Houston and Marsha Kinder, '"American Graffiti"', *Film Heritage,* vol. 9, no. 32 (Winter 1974), p. 35.

[47] Kael, 'Current Cinema', p.156.

written predominantly by white men, share this view. In fact one male commentator rather dismissively referred to the accusation of gender bias as 'coming out of left field', and contended that Lucas 'can't include everything'. The director was in agreement, yet stated that had the script been written at the time of the film's release, instead of two years earlier when the Women's Movement had been 'less militant', he would have been compelled to give the female characters greater parity.[48] For liberal female commentators Bervele Houston and Marsha Kinder, by contrast, the film's experiential focus was the very symptom of this observation. Its critical potential was clearly outweighed by the inherently conservative impulse to escape to the consensus and stability of the 1950s, before the erosion of white male privilege. Such an abstract argument concerning a major trend in American popular culture was given credence by the nation's concurrent rightward political shift. In 1972 the incumbent president Richard Nixon was returned to the White House with 60 percent of the vote, the largest Republican majority to date. Liberals argued Nixon was intent on halting or reversing many of the progressive gains made by Civil Rights, for example. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s was the opening wedge in a decade of widespread social and political protest against a status quo sustained by denying women and minority groups basic democratic rights and freedom, which exposed the illusion of the 1950s consensus.[49]

Grease: the making and marketing of a 1970s 'rock' musical

The success of *American Graffiti* affirmed the pre-eminence of Fifties nostalgia in the 1970s, and inspired a number of 1950s situation comedies, most notably the highly successful shows *Happy Days* (1974-84), and its spin-off *Laverne and Shirley* (1976-83). The long running stage production of the musical *Grease* provided further

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[48] Sturhan, 'The Filming of 'American Graffiti'', p. 24.

[49] Houston and Kinder, '"American Graffiti"', pp. 33-35.

indication of the popular appeal and cultural significance of representations of this recent era from the nation's past. After its initial spell in a small Chicago theatre, the show moved to an off-Broadway theatre, the Eden, Valentine's Day, 1972, and then in June transferred to Broadway.[50] When it closed eight years later, the musical held the record for the longest running show in Broadway history.[51] Since the early 1970s and up until the present day there have been international productions in over twenty countries and numerous revivals in the U.S. and abroad.

In American film industry parlance, *Grease*'s sustained success on Broadway gave it the status of a 'pre-sold' property. In other words, its proven popularity as a show was a form of risk reduction that made it an attractive investment for the Hollywood studios, and on 27 June 1977 shooting began on the RSO production of *Grease* for Paramount Pictures.[52] The eponymous Robert Stigwood Organisation (RSO), a management and promotional company, and record label, was set up in the 1960s by the Australian entertainment entrepreneur who forged the careers of artists such as Eric Clapton and The Bee Gees, and also produced the popular rock musical *Hair* (1968-1973) in London's West End, amongst other productions. At the beginning of the 1970s Stigwood diversified his business operations into film and television, and his hit movie adaptation of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) demonstrated his astute understanding of popular music's lucrative crossover appeal. This was succinctly summarised in 'Rock Tycoon', a seven page article on Stigwood in *Newsweek* magazine, as 'album sells theatre ticket, play sells movie rights, soundtrack album sells movie, movie sells soundtrack album.'[53] Although not a musical, the success of *American Graffiti* and its soundtrack album signaled the considerable commercial potential of movies about

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[50] 'Grease' Film Spurs B.O. For B'way Original', *Variety*, 19 july 1978, pp. 1 and 107.

[51] Thomas S. Hischak, *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical: Theatre, Film, and Television* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 301.

[52] 'Behind the Scenes of "Grease"', *American Cinematographer*, no. 8, vol. 59 (August 1978), p. 756.

[53] 'Rock Tycoon', *Newsweek*, 31 July 1978, p. 41.

1950s teenage rock and roll culture. Four years later RSO's cross-marketing of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) took Stigwood's success to stratospheric heights, and catapulted the movie's young lead, John Travolta, to superstardom, a position he consolidated with his performance in *Grease* the following year. *Saturday Night Fever* was the year's third biggest earner in the U.S., making $74.1 million in rentals, and the soundtrack album yielded three top 10 singles, and remains one of the best selling records of all time with worldwide sales of 35 million copies.[54] Similarly diverse in his business interests, Allan Carr, *Grease*'s co-producer, managed a number of leading show-business personalities, such as Peter Sellers and Marvin Hamlisch. Carr first collaborated with Stigwood as the marketing and promotion consultant on his popular movie rock opera *Tommy* (1975), an important precursor of the producer's latter successes.

Prior to Stigwood's successes in the second half of the 1970s, the once popular musical genre had experienced a decade of declining fortunes; as Peter Kramer notes, '[T]raditional musicals lost ground in the late 1960s and then largely disappeared from the top ten after 1971'.[55] Indeed, up until the early 1970s there were some notable successes such as the number one box office hits *Funny Girl* (1968) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), but also a significant number of failures that included *Star!* (1968) and *Darling Lili* (1970), amongst others. Many of these flops had aimed to emulate the success of *The Sound of Music* (1965), which had made a staggering $80 million in rentals, but instead generated a combined loss of $60 million for the major Hollywood studios between 1967 and 1970, a major contributory cause of the financial crisis of 1969-1971.[56] The decline of the musical, in turn, can largely be attributed to the

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[54] Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 55.

[55] Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower, 2005), p. 41.

[56] Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 209.

contraction of its traditional family audience.[57] Moreover, any attempt to revive the genre and appeal to the younger cinema-goers through the exploitation of popular contemporary music styles would have been 'unimaginable', according to the Stigwood feature in *Newsweek*. Rock music was the principal expression of youthful revolt against American society and its values in the late 1960s, and the culturally homogenising 'Hollywood-rock connection' in the second half of the 1970s, '[I]n 1968....could only have been conjured up on acid'. But as in the subsequent period 'revolt has been supplanted by self-realisation', and Americans had were increasingly compelled to look back at the recent past, the cultural climate became significantly more favourable to such a marriage.[58] Rock music was of course a feature of many film soundtracks in the intervening period. Consider *Easy Rider* and *The Graduate,* for example, two productions funded and distributed by Hollywood, but widely considered emblematic of late 1960s youthful alienation.

For Vincent Canby writing in *The New York Times*, the reason 'musicals failed' during the 1960s was 'because they became solemn, literate, meaningful.'[59] Genres by their very nature are not immutable and this shift in sensibility may have had a diffuse connection to the 1960s liberal zeitgeist arising from such issues and causes as Civil Rights or the Great Society. But it was a development that both failed to inject a new relevance into the genre, and put off much of its traditional family audience, because, as Canby bemoaned, '[A] sense of fun, of irreverence and of irrepressible vulgarity was being lost or painted over.'[60] By the mid to late 1970s, however, these qualities were once more relevant, and Stigwood, recognising their renewed viability, sought to restore

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[57] The success of the revisionist musical *Cabaret* and the Billie Holliday biopic *Lady Sings the Blues* in 1972, indicated musicals were following the broader trend in Hollywood towards more 'adult' themes and content.

[58] 'Rock Tycoon', p. 43.

[59] Vincent Canby, 'Having Fun With the 50s', in *The New York Times Film Reviews 1977-78* (New York: The New York Times and Arno Press, 1979), p. 223.

[60] Ibid.

them in union with the popular musical trends of the last three decades. 'Total fantasy works better today', he averred a few months after the release of *Grease*', likening the contemporary cultural conditions that underpinned its success to those of the musical's heyday in the 1930s and 1940s.[61] During this earlier period the trauma of the Great Depression and a World War heightened audiences' desire for escapist entertainment. Likewise, the disillusionment and crisis in confidence that characterised the national mood in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate 1970s and that was compounded by the country's unstable economic situation, boosted the popularity of late 1970s movie escapism, ranging from the 'rock musical' to science fiction blockbusters such as *Star Wars*. Furthermore, the 'fantasy' movie trend, as noted in 'Rock Tycoon', was in tune with the concomitant shift from 'the political' to 'the personal' in the national culture.[62] Ethnic revivalism, the rise of New Age spirituality, the revival of established religion, the growth of the ecology movement and the political mobilisation of the elderly during the 1970s, all indicated that many millions of Americans were increasingly turning inwards as they embarked upon journeys of self discovery, or sought to realise their personal potential.[63] However, by the same token, the traumatic events of recent history had destabilised the country's traditional myths and ideological norms. As such, American genre filmmaking, a system of cultural production that traditionally played a central role in naturalising myth and reinforcing ideology, became the subject of revision and parody in many 1970s movies. *Grease* is a noteworthy example of a movie whose success can at least in part be ascribed to its incorporation of both of these

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[61] 'The Yellow Brick Road to Profit', *Time*, 23 January 1978, *Grease* microfiche, British Film Institute Library, London.

[62] Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 5.

[63] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), pp. 78-101.

contemporary trends in American film; a Hollywood escapist picture in the guise of a 1950s 'teen movie' parody.[64]

Parody and hybridity in the 1950s teen romance

The central plot of *Grease* - 'boy-meets girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-wins-back-girl' - is a narrative formula familiar to anyone with only a cursory knowledge of Hollywood romance.[65] Danny Zuko (John Travolta) spends an idyllic summer with Sandy Olsen (Olivia Newton John), a pretty yet rather straitlaced Australian girl over in California on vacation. But soon after returning to Rydell High school at the beginning of a new term, he discovers to his surprise that she is now a pupil there. Danny is still in love with Sandy, but denies any knowledge of their romance because he is concerned he will lose face with his friends and fellow members of the T-Birds gang. Upset by this rejection Sandy starts dating one of the school jocks, which in turn makes Danny jealous and impels him to try and earn a 'letter' on his school cardigan by becoming involved in the school sports program. Meanwhile, Sandy is taken under the wing of The Pink Ladies, Rydell High's girl gang. An important subplot of the film is the apparent pregnancy of Rizzo (Stockard Channing), the gang's leader, a product of her relationship with Kenickie, Danny's best friend.

Over the course of the film dramatic interest is sustained by the various misunderstandings between Danny and Sandy that prevent them from getting back

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[64] Late 1970s rock musicals or movies set during the 1950s, included *Grease*, *American Hot Wax* (1978) and *The Buddy Holly Story* (1978), those that focussed on the music of the 1960s included *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* (1978) and *Hair* (1979), and features such as *Saturday Night Fever* and *The Wiz* were concerned with contemporary musical trends. A factor that significantly enhanced the commercial prospects of these productions were the improvements in sound recording and playback in the latter part of the 1970s, as monaural or monophonic sound was increasingly replaced by Dolby-encoded stereo; the number of dolby equipped theatres stood at 800 by the end of 1978. In the end, however, the success of rock or pop musicals or orientated movies was, at best, mixed. 1978, for example, the year *Grease* was released, the biggest musical hit of the 1970s, also witnessed one of the decade's biggest flops in The *Wiz*. Essentially an updated version of the Wizard of Oz with an all black cast, the film produced a net loss of $10.4 million against an investment of $24 million. See Cook, *Lost Illusions*, pp. 219 and 386.

[65] Majorie Rosen, 'Musical Grease', *American Film*, vol. 3, no. 4 (February 1978), p. 12.

together, such as when they go together to the high school dance, only for Danny to win the 'dance-off' with his old girlfriend, Cha Cha. The film's penultimate musical number, however, celebrates Sandy's dramatic transformation from girl-next-door innocence to a sexually confident woman, which also makes her a more plausible love interest, and the couple are once again reunited. Rizzo, furthermore, not only finds out that she is not pregnant after all, but also, contrary to her cynical view of the opposite sex, discovers that in Kenickie she has found a committed and caring boyfriend indicated by his willingness to take on the responsibilities of fatherhood.

Of course, in film musicals it is not the story but the spectacle of song and dance that is the principal attraction, and *Grease*'s simple and predictable plot, in essence, narratively and thematically frames the affective experience of the musical numbers. Significantly, the original musical soundtrack is a mixture of 1950s rock and roll and contemporary disco, which was at the peak of its mainstream popularity in the late 1970s, highlighting the producer's efforts to bridge the distance between the past and the present and therefore appeal strongly to post-baby boomer teenage and pre-teen audience. The intermingling of different styles in this way was ideally suited to such an aim; as one critic noted, *Grease* provided 'a kind of Darwinian link between the Stone Age of swing and today's disco beat', because although music undergoes idiomatic changes, it expresses the same primal needs.[66] Moreover, the film's temporal setting, at the height of an era synonymous with rock and roll and the emergence of a vibrant youth culture, is appropriate to its upbeat, celebratory tone. In the school dance sequence this is sustained by the high energy performance of Sha-Na-Na, a popular, semi-parodic rock and roll covers act, appearing as Johnny Casino and the Gamblers. The musical soundtrack in *American Graffiti*, by comparison, is entirely made up of original compositions from the period, and is as much about evoking the passing of a historical era, as it is the primal urges of the young. This is rather innocuously yet ironically

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[66] Canby, 'Having Fun'.

suggested by the inclusion of the Beach Boys on the film's diegetic musical soundtrack. Significantly, the band's 'new' surf sound provokes a hostile reaction from staunch rock and roller John, whose rather lacklustre impersonation of James Dean is a comment on a moribund subculture.

Fig 5.2 *Echoes of Saturday Night Fever* (1977)

More importantly, the strong disco influence on the soundtrack to *Grease* made good commercial sense, because it referred to John Travolta's star performance in *Saturday Night Fever*, the hit movie about the 1970s dance music phenomenon, released the year before. Travolta's star appeal, in essence, stemmed from his animal magnetism, which in part can be attributed to his flair for dance, combined with a certain innocence and an easy amiability, all qualities that made him particularly popular with teenage girls.[67] During the high school dance, moreover, the audience are visually cued to the film that established his stardom and made him the 'pre-sold' property that was so integral to the success of *Grease*. For the rest of the film Travolta dresses in the attire of the archetypical Fifties greaser, but during this scene he dons a suit combined with an open, big-collared bright pink shirt, a contemporary sartorial note that both distinguishes him

[67] See 'Behind the Scenes', p. 756, and Edwin Miller, 'Flippin' for the Fifties', *Seventeen*, April 1978, p. 222.

from the other male characters and foregrounds the continuity of music and star image between the two movies.

Echoing the hybrid musical soundtrack and its temporal fluidity, the film also parodies a number of popular films and generic styles of movie making, aside from its basic 1950s/1960s teen movie format. The opening sequence, for instance, which shows Danny and Sandy frolicking together in the sand by the crashing Southern Californian surf to the melodramatic strains of 'Love is a Many Splendored Thing', is a direct parody of *A Summer Place* (1959), a melodrama starring Troy Donahue and Sandra Dee. Similarly, towards the end of the film a car race between Danny and the leader of the T-Birds' rival gang, the Scorpions, is knowingly modeled both on the famous 'Chicken Run' sequence in *Rebel Without a Cause* and the equally well known chariot race from *Ben Hur* (1959). Another important movie parody, the 'Beauty School Drop out' sequence, occurs at the midway point and playfully references the elaborately stylised production numbers choreographed by Busby Berkeley in popular musicals of the 1930s and 1940s. Films such as *42nd Street* and *Footlight Parade* (both 1933), transported audiences into a fantasy realm that resonated with utopian possibilities, and proved hugely popular with Depression audiences keen to escape the dire social and economic conditions that beset the nation at the time. In *Grease*, by contrast, the all-white set, steep 'transcendant' steps, and glamourous female dancers with their tall head pieces formed from silver hair rollers, are redolent of Berkeley production numbers but are an ironic counterpoint to Pink Lady gang member Frenchy's ineptitude as a trainee beautician. This is articulated in the mocking lyrics of the number crooned by ex-teen idol Frankie Avalon, famous for his numerous hit singles in the late 1950s and early 1960s and performance in 'beach' comedy movies such as *Beach Party* (1963) and *Bikini Beach* (1964). The cameo roles of other popular actors and entertainers from the 1950s, such as Edd Byrnes, Eve Arden and Sid Caesar, are similarly parodic. Their inclusion further highlights how heavily mediated the film is by popular cultural

representations from the past that, along with the film's overt stylistic and generic hybridity, are considered key attributes of postmodernism.[68] Featuring these stars of the 1950s, moreover, broadened the movie's potential audience by appealing more directly to nostalgic baby-boomers keen to look back with fond amusement at their formative teenage years, when these personalities were household names.

Critical reception and the assimilation of the greaser into the cultural mainstream

Broadly speaking, *Grease* divided the critics, and this polarity of opinion stemmed principally from the question of its historicity, with many of its detractors drawing unfavourable comparisons with the long running stage production. Of course, realism is not a quality the musical genre typically aspires to, and the stage show of *Grease*, widely acknowledged as a parody of 1950s greaser subculture, was no different in this respect. But it was nonetheless a representation considered by commentators writing in a broad range of different publications, to be more historically 'authentic' than its screen adaptation.[69]

Greasers are synonymous with rock and roll, and rock and roll is a sub-culture that grew out of race, class and generational conflict during the 1950s, provoking teenage frenzy and adult moral panic in equal measure. The fundamentals of the greaser 'look' were a black leather jacket, tight t-shirt and jeans, a 'ducktail' hairstyle held in place with copious amounts of grease, and real or mock surliness. Typically, this was a working class male subcultural identity, but was also adopted by middle class teenagers who regarded it as the epitome of rebellious cool. The greaser's innate potential for sexual

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[68] For a lucid, in-depth analysis of postmodern film see M. Keith Booker, *Postmodern Hollywood: What's New in Film and Why It Makes Us Feel So Strange* (London: Praeger, 2007).

[69] See Al Auster, 'Grease', *Cineaste*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1978), pp. 41-42; Richard Schickel, 'Black Hole', *Time*, 19 June 1978, p. 45.; Gene Siskel, 'Travolta Cuts through flaws in surburbanised 'Grease'', Chicago Tribune, 16 June 1978, sec 3, p. 1; Terry Curtis, 'How 'Grease' Got Slick', *Village Voice*, 19 June 1978, *Grease* clippings file, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverley Hills, California.

violence was another widely held perception. This was a form of negative stereotyping often applied to social, ethnic or racial groups outside or on the margins of the dominant culture, and inspired fear in many white middle class males at the same time as it was a source of titillation for middle class girls. Indeed, to scandalised middle class parents, the greaser personified the the causal link between rock and roll and juvenile delinquency, a view advanced by a number of influential social and cultural commentators at the time.[70]

A recurrent criticism of the film in the middle and highbrow press was how the film downplayed the essential social character and underlying antagonisms that defined greaser culture. Indeed, Terry Curtis Fox observed in the left-leaning *Village Voice* how *Grease* had changed from 'a show about Us', to 'a show about them' and finally 'about All of Us', in its passage from Chicago to Broadway and finally onto the big screen. In other words, in its first incarnation in a converted trolley barn located in a white-working class district of the city, the audience contained a large proportion of aging greasers, a regular contingent that attested to its authenticity. The Broadway show managed to retain much of the character of the original production, but softened the threatening aspects of greaser culture by introducing nostalgic elements such as a large poster of James Dean and original rock and roll songs from the period, and thus distancing it from its original social context. Nevertheless its comparatively unabashed representation of greaser culture, it was noted, chimed in with the ethnic revivalism and racial pride, or 'special group' culture, that marked early 1970s and was likely factor in its continued success. 'As taken over by producers Robert Stigwood and Allan Carr,

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[70] The film credited with launching rock and roll into the mainstream was *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), which was famous for its use of Bill Haley's smash hit 'Rock Around the Clock' on the soundtrack. The movie was a huge commercial success, which in part can be attributed to its ambiguous status, on the one hand as a 'social problem' film about juvenile delinquency, and on the other hand as an articulation of generational rebellion. See Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005) pp. 137-9. See also Chapter 5: 'Rock 'n'Roll, Blue Jeans and the Myth of Opposition, in Alan Petiguy, *The Permissive society: America 1941-1965* (New York: Cambridge Uni Press, 2009) pp. 179-223, and Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilisation of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), p. 40.

however, *Grease* has finally been defused', wrote Fox, by moving the story to suburban Southern California, sanitising the language and the greasers, and injecting a contemporary influence into the music.[71]

The film's visual approach acts to naturalise its mythical perspective on the 1950s. The movie's vivid pastel palette, for instance, was inspired by the look of old style musicals, explains cinematographer Bill Butler, and was designed to make it 'bright and cheerful rather than a murky memory', an impression evoked by the tendency in 1970s filmmaking to produce a 'soft, muted look'.[72] Similarly, the clarity of the film's imagery contrasts with the graininess of *American Graffiti*, which alludes to the fact historical representations are inherently mediated or to the fragmentary nature of personal memory, and as such highlight *Grease*'s presentist tendencies. Likewise, where the 'juke box' lighting of the former film radiates an ennui with the suburban teen culture of the 1950s, the aesthetic strategy of the latter helps to enhance its thematic embrace of the normative Fifties suburban white middle class ideal. As Majorie Rosen observed, *Grease's* 'buoyant colours and Southern Californian location helps eradicate the lower class aspect of the stage production'.[73]

This comparison furthermore highlights the contrasting levels of influence each director exerted over their respective productions. Indeed, whereas Lucas enjoyed almost complete creative freedom while making *American Graffiti*, when the young and relatively untried director Randy Kleiser started work on *Grease*, the 'blueprint' of how it was to be shot had been laid out by the film's producers.[74] While the claim made by a Paramount executive that Kleiser had been hired because he was 'malleable' may be

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[71] Curtis, 'How 'Grease' Got Slick'.

[72] 'Behind the Scenes', p. 762-3.

[73] Rosen, 'Musical Grease', p. 17.

[74] 'Behind the Scenes', p. 760-1.

open to conjecture, it can be stated with some certainty that Stigwood was not in the market for a director with a strong personal vision, such as Lucas, who may have been at variance with his commercial aims, the focal element of which was its superstar lead actor, John Travolta.[75] Given the film's success, it is perhaps more appropriate to acknowledge a far less celebrated but nonetheless valuable directorial quality in Kleiser, which is his adaptability to a genre of which he had no prior experience, and, due to its technical demands, is necessarily a highly collaborative effort. Indeed, 'that it's essential to really listen to your choreographer and cinematographer, to work closely and pay attention to them', recounted Kleiser, was the invaluable advice he received from Robert Wise, the respected director of two hugely successful examples of the genre, *West Side Story* (1961) and *The Sound of Music* (1965).[76] The former film, as critics have pointed out, was a major influence on *Grease*.[77]

The changing social context of *Grease*, as it was adapted from stage to screen, and relocated from urban to suburban America, echoed the key demographic trend of the post-war period. Moreover, the 1950s are significant as the decade during which these demographic changes began to accelerate, so '[B]y 1960 as many people lived in suburbs as cities', writes Polenburg.[78] The historian goes on to highlight how the popular image of 1950s suburbia, for instance its 'social homogeneity, pervasive conformity and widespread transience', is in part formed of myths and generalisations that belie the complexity of this social phenomenon.[79] There are, however, some broad observations that can be made. First, the urban migrants to the suburbs were overwhelmingly white, and by 1960 'outnumbered blacks by a ratio of more than thirty

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[75] Stephen Harvey, 'Eine Kleiser Rockmusik', *Film Comment*, no. 4, vol. 14 (July/August 1978), p. 15.

[76] Ibid., p. 16.

[77] Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 127-9 and 132.

[78] Richard Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States since 1938* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 127.

[79] Ibid., p. 137.

five to one'. In the same year, over half of the African-American population lived in the nation's major urban centres, the majority of whom had migrated from southern rural areas from the Second World War onwards.[80] Second, while distinctions did still persist in the suburbs, the majority of 'ethnic' Americans that moved out from the nation's cities could reasonably be described as 'acculturated'.[81] Third, most but not all suburbs were 'middle class', where 'just about everybody lived on the right side of the tracks', or, more accurately, were variously composed of three main classes: 'upper-lower', 'lower-middle' and 'upper-middle'.[82] Viewed from this perspective, then, post-war suburbanisation maintained the nation's dominant culture, and preserved the racial, and, to some extent, social and ethnic separation of American society. While greaser culture cut across ethnic and to a lesser degree class and racial boundaries, and was not exclusively an urban phenomenon, it was commonly identified as 'oppositional'; an urban, white 'ethnic' working class subcultural identity at odds with America's hegemonic norms. This is a perception the film draws upon and reinforces, at least with regards to ethnicity, as three out of the five strong 'T-bird' gang and all of the members of the Pink Ladies are Italian-American. It is a representation that is also 'oppositional', but not explicitly in terms of class, a major deficiency in the opinion of many liberal-intellectual observers. Indeed, given the continuing segmentation of U.S. society and the moral panic rock and roll aroused in the 1950s, greaser gangs in suburban middle class California would have presumably given rise to class antagonisms. Moreover, the impression that the core of a suburban high school in the 1950s was made up by greasers, was 'false and misleading', reflected one critic on her experience as a pupil at suburban high school during the 1950s.[83] Such historical evasions are intrinsic to nostalgia and the notion of the past as simpler and less complex time, and, in the

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[80] Ibid., p. 150.

[81] Ibid., p. 145.

[82] Ibid., p. 141.

[83] Rosen, 'Musical Grease', p. 12.

absence of class conflict, the social threat and pejorative meaning of the greaser is greatly diminished, and thus the potential to alienate any section of the audience.

In the opinion of a number of liberal critics, the romance between Sandy and Danny serves to symbolically assimilate these cultural oppositions, and with the social conflict safely defused it effectively becomes a celebration of middle class values. Indeed, at the same time as Danny, who belongs to a group historically considered deviant and outside the moral and cultural mainstream, is shifted onto the middle-ground in the film, Sandy, a character of anachronistic innocence, makes a similar transition at the film's finale into a woman of erotic appeal dressed in figure hugging black outfit, which makes her consonant with the cultural sensibilities of the sexually liberated 1970s. Furthermore, it highlights her sweet, innocent persona as something of an outmoded throwback to cultural representations of women from the 1940s and 1950s, but is not enough to detract from the overall impression that she will end up in a stable and conventional relationship with Danny. Likewise, Danny's romantic longing for and efforts to appeal to Sandy demonstrates that his rebelliousness is somewhat superficial and that he is amenable to mainstream values and the pursuit of the American Dream.

The film's parodic tone means the romance and other aspects of the narrative are not played straight and are exaggerated for comic effect. But whereas Canby praised the film for standing 'outside the traditions it mimics', the majority of middle to highbrow reviewers subscribed to the view of Stanley Kauffman, that it was 'neither a nostalgic trip to the slick-haired high school life of the '50s nor a consistent satire on it', or, in other words, it attempts to have it both ways.[84] The saccharine qualities of Danny's romance with Sandy, for instance, constitutes a knowing nod to the teen movies from the earlier era, and gently sends-up the naivety and sentimentality synonymous with

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[84] Canby, 'Fantasy of the 50s'; Stanley Kauffman, 'Fin and Fantasy', *The New Republic*, 1 July 1978, pp. 18-19.

1950s Sandra Dee Movies. Yet rather than a repudiating the love story, this is a contrivance that lends the film a kind of double identity. In other words, it navigates an ideological path between continuity and change. As such it is poised between parody and romantic nostalgia, yet inverting the emphasis of the stage production, is significantly closer to the latter than the former.[85]

The parodic representation of the greaser can also be interpreted as ultimately serving the accommodationist ends of the film. Dovetailing with the lack of class conflict, parody helps to neutralise any potential social threat historically posed by this subculture, by enabling the audience to laugh at the preening and posturing of Danny and his cohorts. That Travolta's performance has none of the 'sexual menace' he exuded in *Saturday Night Fever*, a quality at least one critic noted would have made Danny a more compellingly authentic greaser, further defuses this threat.[86] Of course, the type of social or sexual 'authenticity' that satisfies liberal-intellectual critics is routinely sacrificed in nostalgia films aimed at capturing the broadest possible audience. Instead the figure of the greaser is defined in opposition to two softer and more universal targets in the film, 'jock culture' and 'square society'.[87] This is a more commercially viable representation, not least because these sources of teenage antipathy lack social specificity and thus help to promote a sense of romantic identification with the T-Birds amongst middle class viewers. Indeed 'square society', for instance, though associated with 1950s middle class conformity, from the vantage point of the comparatively liberated 1970s, can be viewed anachronistically and largely free from such class connotations. In the film, it is perhaps best personified by Rydell High's principal, played by Eve Arden, who is a stickler for discipline and warns against impropriety at the school 'dance-off' with the threat of immediate disqualification for 'anybody doing

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[85] 'Merchants Tied To 'Grease' Pic; Win A Role Pitch For Youths', *Variety* (w), 8 June 1977, p. 5.

[86] Auster, "Grease", pp. 41-2.

[87] Ibid., p. 42.

tasteless or vulgar movements'. 'Jock culture' is gently sent-up during Danny's unruly foray into the school sports program in an effort to work his way back into Sandy's affections. What is more, the teachers and school jocks are both peripheral and objects of ridicule, which further serves to normalise the figure of the greaser. The representation of the greaser in Lucas' film is more balanced and authentic because they are neither caricatures nor are they placed at the centre of its suburban middle milieu. The inclusion of John the tough working class hot-rod racer and friend to the middle class characters helps to avoid shallow stereotyping, whilst the Pharoahs convey some sense of the greaser's potential for social menace but without mockery or moral judgement, when they coerce Curt into attaching a chain to the axle of a police car, which they then succeed in ripping off.

Unlike *American Graffiti*, the experiences of the male and female characters are given equal emphasis in *Grease*, but in the opinion of one influential liberal observer the film's denouement transforms Sandy into an offensive stereotype. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Charles Champlin dismissed the movie as a 'sleazy and cynical piece of work... that was essentially anti-feminist', and complained that 'the movie's happy ending is to convert Olivia Newton-John, established as a shy and throughly decent sort in shirts and blouses, into a perfect replica of a cut-rate Soho whore.'[88] Champlin makes a valid observation that chimed in with the cause of feminism at the end of the 1970s, and, writes the historian Peter N. Carroll, 'the growing despair about the possibility of social improvement'.[89] A strong anti-feminist counterforce during the second half of the decade mounted a stern defense of traditional family values, and scored two key legislative victories; the curbing of federal funds to pay for abortions and defeating the '"bedrock issue"' of the women's movement, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).[90]

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[88] Charles Champlin, '50s as Seen through 'Grease'', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June 1978 [Grease clippings/ AMPAS].

[89] Carroll, *It Seemed Like*, p. 267.

[90] Ibid., p. 270.

Moreover, '[T]he invisibility of feminist achievement', notes Carroll, 'coincided with a resurgence of traditional stereotypes.' 'In fashion design', for instance, 'the disco style celebrated spike heels, tight pants, transparent tops, and sleek dresses made of body-hugging fabrics-clothing that restored the image of women as sex objects.'[91] Champlin's comments, furthermore, only acknowledge one half of the 'virgin-whore' dichotomy apparently in play in the film. This age-old misogynistic tendency is evident across all cultures and limits women's sexual expression to two mutually exclusive categories. If they fall into the 'whore' category they are 'loose' or 'dirty' and are routinely 'punished', or if they placed in the 'virgin' or 'madonna' category they are 'pure' and 'innocent' and therefore to be 'protected'. Either way they assume a powerless position vis-a-vis patriarchy.[92]

Fig 5.3 Stockard Channing as Rizzo

However, that Sandy's new 'bad girl' persona is product of the Pink Ladies' tutelage complicates this interpretation. A more nuanced reading takes account of this association, and in particular the influence of Stockard Channing's Rizzo, a

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[91] Ibid., p. 272-3.

[92] Harry M. Benshoff, and Sean Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 210.

performance that drew near unanimous praise in the nation's press, and a character of considerable contemporary resonance.[93] Indeed, prior to the climactic final sequence, the opposing 'virgin' and 'whore' stereotypes are articulated by the contrast between Sandy's 'innocence' and the 'experience' of Rizzo and the rest of the Pink Ladies. Within the narrowly misogynistic terms of this dichotomy, Rizzo's unprotected sex with Kenickie in the back of his car and the resulting phantom pregnancy firmly positions her as a 'fallen' woman. Yet, though Sandy is entirely sympathetic, this dichotomy also connotes something of a counter-opposition of 'square' versus 'cool', a distinction enhanced by audience awareness of Olivia Newton-John's successful career as a middle-of-the-road pop and country singer. Rizzo, by comparison, is charismatic, compelling and 'authentic', or, in other words, exhibits the qualities of 'cool' Sandy does not possess. The subtlety and intelligence of Stockard Channing's acting contributes significantly to this perception, steering Rizzo away from caricature, unlike the rest of the characters in the film. Another factor that distinguishes her from the other characters is that she experiences some of the weightier problems and issues associated with teenage life, which include her unreciprocated love for Danny, experiences that play out to suggest that beneath her 'trashy', street smart persona is a vulnerable and sensitive young woman. Conversely, Rizzo can be regarded as the voice of contemporary social and sexual mores, and in spite of her flaws and fallibility is a mediating link between that which was often submerged beneath the surface during a decade characterised by conservative conformity and sexual repression, and the comparatively liberated, post-sexual revolution 1970s. This is clearly exemplified in her two songs. In "Look at Me, I'm Sandra Dee"', she pokes fun at Sandy by parodying the clean-cut image of the 1950s starlet. Similarly, "Worse Things I could Do" makes a moral case for her liberal attitude towards sex by dismissing the futile idealism of saving yourself for 'Mr. Right', and questions the double standard that permits greater sexual freedom for men.

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[93] Ibid., p. 273.

Thus, if Sandy's conversion is motivated by her desire to appeal to Danny, yet is moulded by the ethos of Rizzo and the Pink Ladies, it is less straightforwardly anti-feminist, or at the least ambiguous. On the one hand it can be argued she is succumbing to the passive stereotyping synonymous with male sexual pleasure, while on the other it can be considered a moment of liberation. Another perhaps more persuasive way to read it is, rather than signify a complete transformation, her makeover, as the reviewer for the *Christian Century* wrote, is 'innocence harmlessly corrupted into a happy medium'. While from one perspective this 'affirms the great myth of the melting pot', from another it is a figurative journey of changing socio-cultural attitudes that transports her forwards in time to the late 1970s and suffuses this nostalgia film with a sense of historical change. The resolution of Kenickie and Rizzo's relationship is similarly open to interpretation. Is Kenickie's offer to make Rizzo an 'honest woman' simply a corollary to the happy Hollywood resolution of the central romance; a form of redemption through the union of marriage? Or does it contest the 'madonna-whore' dichotomy in popular culture, which traditionally dictates that sexually transgressive women are not marriageable?

Importantly, the film's success can also be attributed to another cultural symptom of the events of recent history; the impulse for personal re-invention. As the *Hollywood Reporter* declared, *Grease* 'has the feel of 'now'', a response echoed in *Variety* and *The New York Times*.[94] Its lack of fidelity to the social reality of the 1950s decried in a range of publications, including the *Chicago Tribune*, for example, where it was described as having 'been romanticised out of all recognition', was of far less concern to these reviewers.[95] They instead extolled the contemporary rock movie format and the manner

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[94] Arthur Knight, 'Grease', *The Hollywood Reporter* (d), 6 June 1978. See also Murf, *Variety*, 7 June 1978, p. 23; and Canby, 'Fantasy of the 50s.'

[95] Richard Christiansen, '50s fad will end when something bucks trend', *Chicago Tribune*, 8 June 1978, sec 2, p. 2. See also Auster, 'Grease', pp. 41-42; Schickel, 'Black Hole', p. 34; Siskel, 'Travolta Cuts through', p. 1; Curtis, 'How 'Grease' Got Slick'.

in which this example of the 'genre' captured the cultural zeitgeist. Technological advancement played a central role in this process, with the newly installed Dolby playback systems in a significant proportion of the nation's cinema auditoria permitting 'higher sound levels for greater audience involvement'.[96] That at least two reviewers complained about the decibel level underscored the fact that the principal target market for *Grease* was the under-25 year old audience.[97] Encouraging audience involvement and intensifying the transformative potential of the music, furthermore dovetailed with the observation in the *American Cinematographer* that the film 'happens to be perceptive on issues of pride and self image'.[98] However, though this quality or theme has an obvious resonance with teenagers or young Americans for whom attention to personal or group identity is often a central preoccupation, it is also possible to make broader symptomatic connection between this aspect of the film and the apolitical responses of millions of Americans to the contemporary events in the 1970s.

During the decade, as conservative values were in the ascendant, there was concurrently a 'rights revolution' of various groups that extended across the ideological spectrum from the progressive aims of the women and gay liberation movements, to white ethnic or evangelical protestant groups who protested against the legacies of 1960s liberalism. There was also a related upsurge of interest in self help or actualisation through psychotherapy, new age religion and philosophy, and a renewed faith in private enterprise as the solution to both personal and social needs. In part symptomatic of the of the country's uncertain economic situation and Americans' loss of faith in government, these parallel shifts were decried by a number of respected contemporary commentators, such as Tom Wolfe in *The Me Decade*, as a retreat from the collective social responsibility of post-Second World War liberalism towards a society of

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[96] *Variety*, 7 June 1978, *Grease* clippings file/AMPAS.

[97] See John Simon, 'Dog-Day distemper', *National Review*, vol. 30, no. 29, p. 908, and Robert Hatch, 'Films', *The Nation*, vol. 27, no. 1 (July 1978), p. 27

[98] 'Behind the Scenes', p. 756.

competing sectional interests and inward looking, self-absorbed individuals.[99] This widely held position has since been re-evaluated by historians. Edward D. Berkowitz, for example, contends commentators such as Wolfe or Christoper Lasch, the author of *The Culture of Narcissism*, 'misunderstood America's turn to the right and overreacted to it.'[100] 'What they saw as selfish acts of self-protection', argues Berkowitz, 'were to others altruistic gestures to make a better future for their children. Group conflict, by its very nature, also produced group solidarity and led to an engagement with civic affairs.'[101]

As previously discussed, with its comparatively gritty and unabashed representation of greaser culture within its urban milieu, the popular stage play meshed with the 'rights revolution' under way in the 1970s, and the challenge to the country's melting pot myth from discourses of multi-culturalism. The film, by contrast, manifests a related, more diffuse and less ideologically motivated shift in American culture and society. Indeed, adapted to the big screen and the demands of a broader market, as *Newsweek* noted, *Grease*, by contrast, becomes one of 'Stigwood's.... non-sectarian fables for our born-again times.'[102] In other words, by suburbanising the story it aims to achieve a kind of compromise between the conformism of cultural assimilation and its counter-discourse of cultural diversity or individual self-expression. Moreover, this reconciliation in effect conflates two time periods, the 1950s and the 1970s, and lies at the heart of the film's presentist strategy. Indeed, on the one hand the film's Fifties mythology signifies innocence, stability and conventional middle class values in contradistinction to a dominant view of the 1960s. While on the other hand, by figuratively, if not realistically,

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[99] See Tom Wolfe, *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine, and Other Stories, Sketches, and Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

[100] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978); Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 159.

[101] Ibid., p. 158.

[102] 'Rock Tycoon', p. 43.

transporting greaser culture to the centre of suburbia, it articulates, what historian Schulman describes as 'a new informality' in the 1970s, that stems directly from the cultural changes of the previous decade, and that in turn was a reaction to the cultural constraints of the 1950s: 'Hair was no longer an issue. Fashions became outrageous, sexual behaviour less restrained. A new ethic of personal liberation trumped older notions of decency, civility, and restraint. Americans widely embraced this looser code of conduct.' Running on parallel tracks with this broader shift, he adds, they also 'enjoyed the freedom to reinvent themselves. "All sorts of people," one journalist noted, "suddenly appeared as other than they were: stockbrokers dressed up as for safari; English professors looked like stevedores; grandmothers in pant suits, young girls in granny dresses."'[103] That the film sent up the Fifties, moreover, appeared to mesh with the greater fluidity and plurality of personal identity in play during the 1970s. '*Grease*, because of its essential foundation of parody', as Rosen observes, 'of everything being real but also *not* real, is dramatically simple and emotionally uninvolving, and frees us from such contingencies.'[104]

Sandy's dramatic transformation and Danny's acculturation chimed in with the 'Do Your Own Thing culture of the 1970s', writes Marcus in his contemporary study of Fifties nostalgia, and the fact that 'the greaser's distinctive subcultural status could be enjoyed without defensiveness by a wide range of audiences.'[105] The figure of the greaser had been a feature of the Fifties revival from the beginning, most notably in the band Sha-Na-Na and the stage production of *Grease* at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the 1970s, respectively, and by the mid-1970s had become a central trope. The most famous fictional greaser from this period is probably the super cool Arthur Fonzarelli, or 'the Fonz', star of *Happy Days*, a Fifties family sitcom that was one of the

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[103] Schulman, *The Seventies*, pp. xv-xvi.

[104] Rosen, 'Musical Grease', p. 12.

[105] Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 32.

highest rated programmes on television in the latter part of the decade. Inspired by *American Graffiti*, but lacking its depth and complexity, *Happy Days* in turn prefigures the urban working class/suburban middle class cultural integration and flattening out of social conflict in *Grease*. 'The result in *Happy Days*', writes Marcus, is to depict a distinct teenage-boy culture, but to ensconce that culture in secure family relations', with the action revolving around 'two poles of experience' represented by the 'authority figures'; '"the Fonz," and Mr. Cunningham, the benign family patriarch.'[106] The Fonz's 'street smart' vernacular, and black leather jacket and boots, made his working class, subcultural identity self evident, but he was made to fit middle class norms through his rejection of violence, his middle class teenage friends and his eventual move into the Cunningham's suburban home.[107]

Similar to all other aspects of Fifties nostalgia, the socio-cultural 'meaning' of the greaser and its attendant popularity in the 1970s proceeded from its contrastive relationship with the explicit rejection of cultural mores and political dissent of the 1960s. Much of this youthful revolt was enacted by what came to be referred to as the counterculture. The lineage of the counterculture in turn can be traced back to the non-conformist attitudes and practices commonly associated with another cultural phenomenon of the 1950s, the 'Beat Generation', which drew much of its inspiration from, at the same time as being documented by, the writers Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, amongst others. The Beats are conspicuous by their near absence from cultural representations of the 1950s in the 1970s, and, by implication, antithetical to the symbolic needs and desires of the majority of Americans at the time. Indeed, whereas the Beats were characterised by their 'interest in eastern religion and philosophy' and 'drug use', were 'configured as largely middle class, left-wing, intellectual', and in some instances were openly homosexual (Ginsberg), notes

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[106] Ibid., p. 24.

[107] Ibid., p. 30.

Marcus, the greaser was 'working class, usually a non-Jewish "white ethnic,"... decidedly unintellectual and apolitical', and 'physicalised' through their class association with 'manual labour'. Both groups were fans of black music, but the greasers, unlike the Beats, did not emulate black social attitudes and behaviour. 'The masculinity of the greaser', then 'was counterposed to the social chaos and freewheeling self-expression of the counterculture of the sixties', and, by contrast, 'could be seen as more firmly belonging within an era of American political, military, and economic dominance and stability, all of which had been damaged by the time of the Fonz's debut in 1974.' In effect, the crisis and controversy that rocked American society in the ensuing period, retrospectively invested this subcultural type with resonant meaning, as a symbol of simpler and better times from the past, and hope and optimism for the future.[108]

Crucially, however, this was a cultural symbol that resonated with working class and middle class Americans alike, even if it was for different and, in some respects, conflicting reasons. For many blue collar Americans in the 1970s, the greaser was an important symbol of the American working class' contribution to the national culture, at a time of economic turmoil and insecurity, and against the backdrop of a national media that did not adequately represent their concerns. Similarly, its popularity signaled a perceptual shift with regards to America's war in Vietnam. Vietnam veterans, of which around 80% were from blue collar or poor backgrounds, were often either ignored or the focus of considerable civilian hostility during and after the conflict, attitudes that were ameliorated with the circulation of this working class sub-cultural type in popular culture. Apolitical and evoking a more innocent, stable and secure time, the greaser acted to disassociate the Vietnam veteran from the complexity and controversy of the conflict and imbue him with honesty, reliability and a sense of nobility. To middle class Americans the greaser had a paradoxical appeal, both as a reminder of the lost pleasures

[108] Ibid., pp. 30-2.

of youth but also an indication of social progress. Indeed, the disappearance of this distinct subculture affirmed the success of the American dream and the dominance of the nation's middle class that had benefitted from increased educational opportunities and economic growth. 'The Fonz indicated what the nation had lost since the 1950s', notes Marcus, 'but also what it had gained.'[109] Another important factor explaining the significance of the greaser and 1950s rock and roll in general was that it was also a locus of generational unity, with post-baby boom teenagers and pre-teens participating in the revival of the defining cultural feature of their parent's formative years. Indeed, as filtered through the selective and distorting prism of 1970s nostalgia, this was injected with a renewed relevance as a vibrant and highly distinctive subculture which at the same time embodied many of the universal experiences of growing up. Again, and perhaps most importantly, it was furthermore an expression of rebellion that was comparatively benign when retrospectively framed by the sexual experimentation, radical politics and drug use of the 1960s counterculture.[110]

Conclusion

The 1950s resonated strongly in the 1970s, and with reference to two of the biggest hits of the decade, this chapter has demonstrated not only the significance of the Fifties to American audiences during this period, but also the diversity and complexity of its representation. In other words, by recycling the familiar tropes and signifiers of the 1950s teen movie, *American Graffiti* and *Grease* contained a shared set of basic meanings and associations familiar to audiences owing to their wide circulation in 1970s popular culture: youth, innocence, stability and so on. Indeed, given their hit success, the essential pleasures provided by the iconography, character types and situations in these films were clearly enjoyed by a broad spectrum of cinema-goers. As

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[109] Ibid., p. 33.

[110] Ibid., p. 18.

has been noted, the self-mythologising processes of the 1950s injected these elements with much of their extraordinary potency. Yet the distinctive style, tone, social construction and historical setting, of each film meant these signs were not only updated and lent a contemporary relevance, but also functioned to support contrasting underlying themes. Thus, while they shared a common object, the Fifties, it was experienced somewhat differently depending on the age of the cinema-goer.

As this chapter demonstrated, *American Graffiti* had a special resonance with the country's baby boom generation, and in particular white, college educated film-goers, a cohort that accounted for by far the largest proportion of cinema audiences in the early 1970s. Mourning the passing of the 1950s and anticipating the dawning of the 1960s, the film's Janus-like historical perspective elicited a complex response in many baby-boomers who had come of age in the latter decade, that was part affect and part critical comment. That is, it delivered many of the pleasures of the Fifties, especially the period's distinctive car culture, yet its 1962 setting foreshadows the beginning of a seismic cultural shift that ultimately renders 1950s youth culture naive, quaint and ultimately obsolete. This underlying ambivalence is also reinforced by its observational point of view and its subtly ironic visual strategy, two self-conscious 'modernist' strategies that cue new audience types to its critical potential. One can speculate, furthermore, that had the film featured any star actors, this added discourse may have detracted from its powerfully 'dialogical' or 'autobiographical' appeal, invoked by its poignant blend of personal and public experience.

That *Grease* made $40 million more in rentals than *American Graffiti* reflects the comparative size of its advertising budget, but also suggests a greater cross-generational appeal. This underpinned the chief commercial stratagem of the post-*Jaws* blockbuster era, which aimed to satisfy baby-boomers, many of whom were new audience cinephiles, as well as the crucial and rapidly expanding post-baby boom teenage

segment. A major pleasure for the former was the film's allusions to classical Hollywood films, and 1950s television and movies, and for the latter its dynamic and immersive musical sequences, which benefitted from recent improvements in sound recording and playback.[111] In the wake of *Saturday Night Fever*'s success, Travolta was one of the first people to become aware of this phenomenon: '"When you talk to kids who've seen it many times, you discover they don't even like the story,' he recounted in an interview, because '[t]o them, the movie is a concert".'[112] The music in *Grease* was the chief attraction for this demographic too, but its success can also be attributed to the universal themes this element served to advance; the film's celebration of middle class values is enacted by suburbanising the original theatre production and assimilating the working class figure of the greaser into the cultural mainstream, and thus defusing its social threat. In this way, the greaser becomes a potent multiple signifier and locus of generational unity, its meanings and values, such as honesty, reliability, nobility, evoked through its oppositional relationship to the complex socio-political upheavals and countercultural withdrawal of the 1960s. Its rendering as a comparatively benign and apolitical symbol of rebellion, moreover, was an allegory of contemporary American society, which, since the previous decade, had become less culturally repressed and more individually self-expressive.

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[111] Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p.386.

[112] Ibid., p. 59.

Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the complex and contradictory dialogue between New Hollywood historical films and the period of their production. The success and significance of filmic history, it has been argued, is to a great extent dependent upon this mediation, and how it 're-presents' the past in a manner which is relevant to the social concerns and cultural conditions of the present. The in-depth analysis of six significant New Hollywood historical films asserts this claim; the pleasures and meanings of each case study interpreted with reference to its production context, representational strategies, and reception, as well as in relation to changes in the film industry, audiences, and within American society at large. It has also been comparative, with each film discussed within the broader context of its generic type and the dominant stylistic tendencies of the period. Thus by situating New Hollywood filmic history in relation to the evolution of the historical film since the Second World War, and highlighting the noteworthy commonalities and differences between the various case studies, this conclusion will outline its major defining characteristics.

The post-war era was a period of transformation in Hollywood, chiefly in response to divestment, the gradual relaxation of the Production Code, and both the decline and changing demography of cinema audiences, all of which would have a number inter-related consequences for filmic history. First, it gradually became more frank and strived for greater 'authenticity', so by the New Hollywood era, as Cameron notes, 'history was no longer a moral paradigm about poetic justice and the rightness of America, the idea of history that had been inherited from the nineteenth century was

over.'[1] Second, was the increasing democratisation of the past, to the extent that by the late 1960s filmic history overwhelmingly narrated the historical experiences of 'ordinary' Americans or social 'outsiders'. Representations of the white male experience still predominated, albeit from the 'bottom-up' rather than the 'top-down', but there was also a limited increase in and more evenhanded representation of other racial and ethnic groups. With regards to the representation of women, wrote James Monaco at the end of the 1970s, '[O]ne of the most striking discoveries a film student can makes is how much further advanced women's roles were in the twenties, thirties and forties.' A number of releases, including the historical film *Julia* (1977), from Lillian Hellman's story, however, are seen by the critic as an indication that society is beginning to emerge from the 'dark age of sexual politics' that dates from the early 1950s.[2] Third, the solid majority of these representations were set in the recent past with a strong emphasis on American settings, which may have been a reaction to the epic myths and bombast of Road-show era productions, a significant proportion of which were set in the distant past and in faraway places.[3] Socially, the gradual leveling of society in the post-war period, resulting from the consciousness raising efforts and legislative victories of the Civil Rights movement, for example, though extremely slow and uneven, was a major casual factor of the historical film's greater pluralism. But above all it was generational change that accounts for many of the key characteristics of New Hollywood filmic history, and the diversity and complexity of its representation. This was brought into sharp relief with the growing divergence in values and attitudes in the 1960s between a sizable minority of politically active and/or countercultural post-War baby boomers, and their parents' generation.

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[1] Kenneth M. Cameron, *America on Film: Hollywood and American History* (New York: Continuum, 1997), p. 225.

[2] Paul Monaco, *American Film Now: The People, the Power, the Money, the Movies* (New York: New American Library, 1984), p. 57-8.

[3] Drew Casper, *Hollywood Film 1963-1976: Years of Revolution and Reaction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 153.

On the cinema screen, the generation gap was manifested in the rise of 'youth' oriented releases. Indeed, while the critical attitude of baby-boomers towards the conservative cultural and political consensus of the 1950s was the chief cause of the social turbulence that marked the following decade, for the American film industry, by contrast, this cohort represented an important source of revenue and, as such, stability at a time of financial uncertainty. The influential core of this segment consisted of the new audience, who were typically liberal and left-leaning, college-educated, middle class and cine-literate. The type of historical films favoured by this niche reflected their questioning or cynical attitude towards American society and its institutions, and tended to be ironic, irreverent and socially critical auteur productions. Though the key issues and developments of the period were rarely addressed directly in these films, they were a structuring presence nonetheless. Arthur Penn's blackly satirical western, *Little Big Man* (1970), for example, inverts the traditional western story of Indian savagery in conflict with white civilisation, Sobchak observes, by using 'the inflated and extravagant epic form to deflate the power of founding myths and symbols and show America with no moral code whatsoever', and as such can be read as allegory of contemporary racial injustice or America's controversial war in Vietnam.[4] Another major contemporary tendency linked to the tastes and attitudes of the youth segment, both the new audience and more broadly, was the 'cinema of sensation'. The popularity of foreign film imports and 'teen' exploitation movies in the late 1950s and early 1960s prefigured this development, which by the late 1960s had been absorbed into the cinematic mainstream, and was instrumental in establishing a 'new morality' in contemporary filmmaking. After the Production Code was replaced by the new ratings system in 1968, adult themes and graphic depictions of sex, violence and drug taking became commonplace in cinema. History on film during this period was thus re-shaped to more closely reflect the social attitudes and cultural mores commonly associated with

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[4] Vivian Sobchak, '"Surge and Splendor": A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic', in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), p. 317.

America's younger generation. Yet, while on the one hand this moral and aesthetic shift enabled more truthful or honest representations of the past, on the other hand the increase in lurid and sensational imagery on the nation's screens indicated its cynical commercial exploitation, which it was argued came at the expense of accuracy and balance. Progressives pointed to the graphic and shocking images of America's conflict in Vietnam on the nightly news as evidence of the disconnect between Hollywood and contemporary realties. To more conservative-minded Americans, by comparison, the explicit and sensational nature of much 'youth' oriented cinema was a patent reflection of a society that was changing too rapidly and had lost its moral compass. The Hollywood film industry, on the other hand, was less troubled by questions of morality than it was by profit, and attempted to provide for all the different pleasures and demands of movie-going's fragmented and changing market. To be sure, the 'youth' demographic was a priority, but the crisis conditions in the late 1960s and early 1970s presented other opportunities and challenges for Hollywood, not least the task of producing films that captured a culturally diverse audience. To this end, the past was an important resource in film production during the period, with its potential for the commingling of contemporary metaphors, historical understanding and more direct screen pleasures. What is more, though the New Hollywood auteurs figured prominently and drove key trends, the filmmakers contributing to the overall picture of the period's historical cinema were diverse, ranging from the seasoned maverick, Robert Aldrich, through Sydney Pollack, a skilled and sensitive mainstream stylist, to the rock impresario, Robert Stigwood.

As the case study demonstrated, *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) was a signal historical film in the development of the New Hollywood. Not only did Aldrich's cynical and brutal Second World War combat movie indicate that existing censorship laws were outdated and ultimately an impediment to commercial success, but it also evinced an astutely responsive attitude to contemporary developments and audience tastes that succeeded in

capturing a broad section of a fragmented market. Certainly, the film's target audience was 15-25 year old males, but this was far from a homogenous grouping and it was made variously 'available' to a range of different tastes and priorities. Indeed, the film's broad, over-arching anti-authoritarian theme tapped diffusely into the heightened generational tensions of the period and more directly into resentment towards the draft for the Vietnam war. A further level of subversive meaning for perceptive observers was the film's inverted 'anti-anti-authoritarian' subtext. But as the case study analysis illustrated, it was enjoyed just as much by 'naive' viewers, owing to its sensational scenes of violence and earthy humour. Furthermore, the connotations of the 'good war', a meaning inherent to most Second World War combat movies, in conjunction with its central theme, meant it was neither unambiguously pro- or anti-war, a factor that helped it achieve the level of popularity that it did.

The success of *Sounder* (1972), by contrast, was something of a barometer of disapproval and outrage in the face of cinema's increasingly explicit and sensational representations, and attracted a racially mixed, predominantly middle class audience. Ritt's film was widely extolled by leading cultural and religious figures as the uplifting antidote to the crude and offensive fantasies of the blaxploitation wave, and in the impoverished characters' dignified struggle, mediated the non-violent integrationist ethos of the Civil Rights movement. Another layer of mediation reinforcing this perception was its allusions to 1930s FSA photography of dustbowl migrants. But these images of fortitude along with its Southern pastoral mythos, were anathema to many young inner city African Americans, as well as a number of leading liberal/metropolitan critics. To the former, the heroes of black action films were ruggedly individual symbols of defiance against white oppression, to the latter the black characters in *Sounder* were as narrowly and stereotypically drawn as the protagonists of films such as *Shaft* (1971) or *Superfly* (1972).

The nostalgic 'women's film' *The Way We Were* (1973), was another production that stood in contrast to the proliferation of graphic and sensational movies produced in the early 1970s, but was carefully configured to appeal to a mixed audience. While firmly in the classical mould, this Arthur Laurent-penned romantic melodrama accommodated the tastes and attitudes of the contemporary period with its political back story and social themes. The star personae of Barbra Streisand (Katie Morosky) and Robert Redford (Hubbel Gardiner) were crucial to its success, as symbolic opposites and effective mediations between the ideological attitudes of the 1930s and 1940s, and the 1970s. The costume, style and unconventional beauty of Streisand, who played the film's independent-minded, politically active female lead, functioned as marker of social change and difference in the intervening period. As the attractive, charming and privileged WASP, Redford ambivalently evoked America's dominant order, which, according to some contemporary cultural commentators, was in decline. His skeptical attitude towards Katie's political idealism, was, moreover, consonant with the film's downplaying of the political story as well as the 'conservative rebellion' his star image embodied.

Historical change was also articulated by *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Grease* (1978), the two most successful Fifties films of the 1970s. The appeal of *American Graffiti*'s artful and humourous evocation of the Fifties was cross generational, and enjoyed both by cinema-goers who could draw on personal memories of the earlier era, and those too young to remember. But, similar to *The Dirty Dozen*, this mainstream hit generated another layer of meaning, which resonated with the baby-boomers in the audience. By virtue of its 1962 setting and visual construction, the film was subtly inflected with a complex ambivalence, and as such represented a historical marker that at once invoked the public and private spheres of experience of those who reached adulthood in the 1960s. One of the key attractions of *Grease* for this demographic, by contrast, was parodic rather than poignant, with its comedic cameo appearances from stars of the

1950s, and in the way it sent-up the culture and values of the era. The film's disco-infused rock 'n' roll soundtrack helped collapse the cultural distance between its teenage fans and adults in the audience, and its conservative affirmation of the suburban middle class ideal, reflected the re-formulation of Hollywood's classical norms and traditional values that had become the commercial dominant by end of the 1970s.

Historically, movies about the movies were symptomatic of troubled times in Hollywood. Before the 1970s, the last period this generic type was produced in any significant quantity was the 1950s, when the economic health of the American film business was under threat from divestment and the rise of television. But films such as *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952), though casting Hollywood in a cynical and tragic light, are notable for delivering the kind of cinematic artistry and compelling performances that served to preserve its potent mythology. There was some evidence of these qualities in *The Day of the Locust* (1975), but not enough to satisfy the majority of filmgoers in the mid-1970s. The film's ambitious yet heavy-handed historical themes strained somewhat for significance. The 'threat', moreover, unlike the contemporary disaster movies to which it was compared, was complex, insidious and unidentifiable, thus limiting the redemptive possibilities for the story's protagonists.

There are numerous other examples of compelling and culturally significant New Hollywood historical films that would both support the observations in this study and open up new avenues of critical inquiry, which range from the iconic (*Once Upon A Time in the West* (1968), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather II* (1974) and *Raging Bull* (1980), for example), the infamous (*Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Heaven's Gate* (1980)), through to many lesser known releases (*The Molly Maguires* (1970) *Dillinger* (1973) *Lords of Flatbush* (1974) and *Leadbelly* (1976)). Importantly, an ever increasing amount of primary source material on New

Hollywood era productions is becoming available, which is essential to the type of empirically anchored analysis practiced in this study. The Sydney Pollack papers have recently been bequeathed to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), for example, materials that would support a close investigation of this underrated director, whose career spanned five decades, and included popular but critically neglected hits, such as *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972). Looking to the 1980s, another possible area of inquiry would be a broader historical analysis of Fifties nostalgia, from its emergence in the 1970s and continued popularity in the following decade, as evidenced by films such as *The Flamingo Kid* (1984), *Blue Velvet* (1986), and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986).

Indeed, while this thesis, the first sustained examination of the New Hollywood historical film, marks a key intervention in the burgeoning field of historical film studies, it is, by the same token, the first major step towards enriching our understanding of the filmic past in American cinema produced between the late 1960s and 1980. As studies of other periods of cinematic history have demonstrated, the past has and continues to be a vital commercial resource for Hollywood and of significant cultural value to film audiences, a critical observation which applies equally to the New Hollywood, an era that has been neglected by historical film studies. Thus, notwithstanding factors that appear to counter this claim, such as the comparatively narrow historical range of the filmic past in the late 1960s and 1970s, or its lack of historical 'seriousness' compared to historical productions of the preceding and subsequent periods, it is the stylistic diversity, and complex and often contradictory ideological construction of these representations that sets the New Hollywood apart as a noteworthy period of American cinematic history. The conjunction of a society in conflict and flux, and a period of crisis and re-adjustment in the film industry, shaped

and expanded the expressive possibilities of the medium, and in so doing the filmic representations of the past. By situating key New Hollywood historical films in relation to the contextual history of the period, the thesis herein reveals and critically examines these qualities, and as such invites further research into an era of American cinema that continues to be of great interest to scholars and the wider public alike.

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The Day of the Locust

Paramount/Long Road. 1975.

Director: John Schlesinger ; *Novel:* Nathanel West; *Screenplay:* Waldo Salt; *Producer:* Jerome Hellman; *Associate producer:* Sheldon Schrager; *Music:* John Barry; *Director of photography*: Conrad L. Hall; *Editor:* Jim Clark; *Casting director:* Marion Dougherty; *Production designer:* Richard Macdonald; *Art Director:* John J. Lloyd; *Costume designer:* Ann Roth; *Certificate:* R; *Running time:* 144 mins; *Release date:* 7 May.

Cast: Donald Sutherland (Homer Simpson); Karen Black (Faye Greener); Burgess Meredith (Harry Greener); William Atherton (Tod Hackett); Geraldine Page (Big Sister); Richard Dysart (Claude Estee); Bo Hopkins (Earle Shoop); Pepe Serna (Miguel); Lelia Goldoni (Mary Dove); Billy Barty (Abe Kusich); Jackie Earle Haley (Adore); Gloria LeRoy (Mrs. Loomis); Jane Hoffman (Mrs. Odlesh); Norman Leavitt (Mr. Odlesh); Madge Kennedy (Mrs. Johnson); Ina Gould (Lee Sisters); Florence Lake (Lee Sisters); Margaret Willey (The Gingos); John War Eagle (The Gingos); Natalie Schafer (Audrey Jennings); Gloria Stroock (Alice Estee); Nita Talbot (Joan); Nicholas Cortland (Projectionist); Alvin Childress (Butler); Byron Paul (Guest); Virginia Baker (Guest); Roger Price (Guest); Angela Greene (Guest); Robert O. Ragland (Guest); Abbey Greshler (Guest); Ann Coleman (Girl); Gyl Roland (Girl); Paul Stewart (Helverston); John Hillerman (Ned Grote); William Castle (Director as William C. Castle); Fred Scheiwiller (1st Asst. Director); Wally Rose (2nd Asst. Director); Grainger Hines (French Lt.); DeForest Covan (Shoe Shine Boy); Michael Quinn (Major Domo); Robert Pine (Apprentice); Jerry Fogel (Apprentice); Dennis Dugan (Apprentice); David Ladd (Apprentice); Bob Holt (Tour Guide); Paul Jabara (Nightclub Entertainer); Queenie Smith (Palsied Lady); Margaret Jenkins (Choral

Director); Jonathan Kidd (Undertaker); Kenny Solms (Boy in Chapel); Wally K. Berns (Theatre Manager); Bill Baldwin (Announcer at Premiere); Dick Powell Jr. (Dick Powell).

Sounder

Radnitz/Mattel productions. 1972.

Director: Martin Ritt; *Novel:* William H. Armstrong; *Screenplay:* Lonne Elder III; *Producer:* Robert B. Radnitz; *Music:* Taj Mahal; *Director of photography:* John A. Alonzo; *Editors:* Sidney Levin, Michael A. Hoey; *Casting director:* Joe Scully; *Production designer:* Walter Scott Herndon; *Assistant director:* Don Guest; *Certificate:* G; *Running time:* 105 mins; *Release date:* 24 September.

Cast: Cicely Tyson (Rebecca Morgan); Paul Winfield (Nathan Lee Morgan); Kevin Hooks (David Lee Morgan); Carmen Mathews (Mrs. Boatwright); Taj Mahal (Ike); James Best (Sheriff Young); Eric Hooks (Earl Morgan); Yvonne Jarrell (Josie Mae Morgan); Sylvia Kuumba Williams (Harriet); Teddy Airhart (Mr. Perkins); Richard Durham (Perkins' Foreman); Wendell Brumfield (Deputy #1); Al Bankston (Deputy #2); Myrl Sharkey (Teacher); Inez Durham (Court Clerk); William T. Bennett (Judge); Thomas N. Phillips (Pastor); Carl Braser (Wagon Driver); Jerry Leggio (Guard #1); Peter Goff (Guard #2); Walter L. Chaney (Guard #3); Roy Idom (Guard #4); Randy Wilson (Convict #1); Isaac Greggs (Convict #2); Jackie Spears (Girl #1); Porter Mathews (Boy #1); Spencer Bradford (Clarence); Janet MacLachlan (Camille); Swampy (Sounder).

The Dirty Dozen

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, MKH and Seven Arts Productions. 1967.

Director: Robert Aldrich; *Novel:* E.M. Nathanson; *Screenplay:* Nunnally Johnson, Lukas Heller; *Producers:* Raymond Anzarut, Kenneth Hyman; *Music:* Frank De Vol; *Director of photography:* Edward Scaife; *Editor:* Michael Luciano; *Art Director:* William Hutchinson; *Assistant director:* Bert Batt; *Certificate:* approved; *Running time:* 150 mins; *Release date:* 15 June.

Cast: Lee Marvin (Major Reisman); Ernest Borgnine (General Worden); Charles Bronson (Joseph Wladislaw); Jim Brown (Robert Jefferson); John Cassavetes (Victor Franko); Richard Jaeckel (Sergeant Bowren); George Kennedy (Major Max Armbruster); Trini López (Pedro Jiminez); Ralph Meeker (Captain Stuart Kinder); Robert Ryan (Col. Everett Dasher Breed); Telly Savalas (Archer Maggott); Donald Sutherland (Vernon Pinkley); Clint Walker (Samson Posey); Robert Webber (General Denton); Tom Busby (Milo Vladek); Ben Carruthers (Glenn Gilpin); Stuart Cooper (Roscoe Lever); Robert Phillips (Corporal Morgan); Colin Maitland (Seth Sawyer); Al Mancini (Tassos Bravos); George Roubicek (Pvt. Arthur James Gardner); Thick Wilson (General Worden's Aide).

The Way We Were

Columbia Pictures and Rastar Productions. 1973.

Director: Sydney Pollack; *Novel and screenplay:* Arthur Laurents; *Producer:* Ray Stark; *Associate producer:* Richard A. Roth; *Music:* Marvin Hamlisch; *Director of photography:* Harry Stradling Jr.; *Editor:* John F. Burnett; *Production designer:* Stephen B. Grimes; *Costume designers:* Dorothy Jeakins, Moss Mabry; *Assistant director:* Hawk Koch; *Certificate:* PG; *Running time:* 118 mins; *Release date:* 19 October.

Cast: Barbra Streisand (Katie); Robert Redford (Hubbell); Bradford Dillman (J.J.); Lois Chiles (Carol Ann); Patrick O'Neal (George Bissinger); Viveca Lindfors (Paula

Reisner); Allyn Ann McLerie (Rhea Edwards); Murray Hamilton (Brooks Carpenter); Herb Edelman (Bill Verso); Diana Ewing (Vicki Bissinger); Sally Kirkland (Pony Dunbar); Marcia Mae Jones (Peggy Vanderbilt); Don Keefer (Actor); George Gaynes (El Morocco Captain); Eric Boles (Army Corporal); Barbara Peterson (Ashe Blonde); Roy Jenson (Army Captain); Brendan Kelly (Rally Speaker); James Woods (Frankie McVeigh); Constance Forslund (Jenny); Robert Gerringer (Dr. Short); Susan Blakely (Judianne); Edward Power (Airforce); Susanne Zenor (Dumb Blonde); Dan Seymour (Guest).

American Graffiti

Universal Pictures, Lucasfilm and The Coppola Company. 1973.

Director: George Lucas; *Screenplay:* George Lucas, Gloria Katz, Willard Huyck; *Producer:* Francis Ford Coppola; *Co-producer:* Gary Kurtz; *Directors of photography*: Jan D'Alquen, Ron Eveslage, Haskell Wexler; *Editors:* Verna Fields, Marcia Lucas, George Lucas; *Casting directors:* Mike Fenton, Fred Roos; *Art director:* Dennis Lynton Clark; *Costume designer:* Aggie Guerard Rodgers; *Assistant director:* Ned Kop; *Certificate:* PG; *Running time:* 110 mins; *Release date:* 11 August.

Cast: Richard Dreyfuss (Curt); Ron Howard (Steve); Paul Le Mat (John); Charles Martin Smith (Terry); Cindy Williams (Laurie); Candy Clark (Debbie); Mackenzie Phillips (Carol); Wolfman Jack (Disc Jockey); Bo Hopkins (Joe); Manuel Padilla Jr. (Carlos); Beau Gentry (Ants); Harrison Ford (Bob Falfa); Jim Bohan (Holstein); Jana Bellan (Budda); Deby Celiz (Wendy); Lynne Marie Stewart (Bobbie); Terence McGovern (Mr. Wolfe); Kathleen Quinlan (Peg); Tim Crowley (Eddie); Scott Beach (Mr. Gordon); John Brent (Car Salesman).

Grease

Paramount Pictures, Robert Stigwood Organization (RSO) and Allan Carr Production. 1978.

Director: Randal Kleiser; *Music:* Jim Jacobs, Warren Casey; *Screenplay:* Bronte Woodard; *Adaptation:* Allan Carr; *Producers:* Robert Stigwood, Allan Carr; *Associate producer:* Neil A. Machlis; *Director of photography:* Bill Butler; *Editor:* John F. Burnett; *Casting director:* Joel Thurm; *Production designer:* Philip M. Jefferies; *Costume designer:* Albert Wolsky; *Assistant director:* Jerry Grandey; *Certificate:* PG-13; *Running time:* 110 mins; *Release date:* 16 June.

Cast: John Travolta (Danny Zuko); Olivia Newton-John (Sandy Olsen); Stockard Channing (Betty Rizzo); Jeff Conaway (Kenickie); Barry Pearl (Doody); Michael Tucci (Sonny); Kelly Ward (Putzie); Didi Conn (Frenchy); Jamie Donnelly (Jan); Dinah Manoff (Marty Maraschino); Eve Arden (Principal McGee); Frankie Avalon (The Teen Angel); Joan Blondell (Vi); Edd Byrnes (Vince Fontaine); Sid Caesar (Coach Calhoun); Alice Ghostley (Mrs. Murdock); Dody Goodman (Blanche); Sha-Na-Na (Johnny Casino & The Gamblers); Susan Buckner (Patty Simcox); Lorenzo Lamas (Tom Chisum); Fannie Flagg (Nurse Wilkins); Dick Patterson (Mr. Rudie); Eddie Deezen (Eugene Felnic); Darrell Zwerling (Mr. Lynch); Ellen Travolta (Waitress); Annette Charles (Cha Cha DiGregorio); Dennis Stewart (Leo).